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“Keep that Fan Mail Coming.” Ceremonial Storytelling and Audience Interaction in a US Soldier’s Milblog

Abstract: The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq initiated a surge of texts by US soldiers who utilized recent Web 2.0 technology to forge new types of war narratives, such as the so-called “milblogs.” Milblogs merge letter and journal writing with journalistic reporting, and they maintain contact between soldiers and their social environment. They are at once public and private communication. Military psychology since Vietnam has referred to warrior traditions of Native American communities to discuss public narration and ceremonial acknowledgment of a soldier’s war experience as vital elements for veteran readjustment and trauma recovery. This article analyzes an exemplary milblog to argue that the interaction between blogger and audience does similar cultural work and has comparable ceremonial and, therefore, therapeutic functions: Soldiers publicly share their experience, reflect on it with their audience, receive appreciation and support, and thus mutually (re-)negotiate group identity.

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1 Introduction

When Captain Doug Traversa prepared to return home after a one-year deployment in Afghanistan in 2007, he was aware of the political discussions about the recent conflicts but also voiced his impression that many civilians were not concerned with or even noticed the war in Afghanistan much. He had just learned that a fellow soldier from his Tennessee hometown had been killed by a bomb in Afghanistan. Venting his growing anger in his weblog, he added:

And of course, there [are] many things I can’t discuss that contribute to these feelings. I have a medical form I have to fill out before I leave. Among the questions I have to answer are “Did you see anyone wounded, killed, or dead during this deployment?” (Yes) and “Did you ever feel that you were in great danger of being killed?” (Yes). They also want to know if I have felt down or depressed over the last two weeks (No, never. No one ever feels down when they [have] been deployed to a war zone for a year, especially when the Senate Majority Leader has declared the war to be lost). (Traversa, “Sgt. David Stephens”)

This incident reveals the urgency of several intermingling issues of how Americans have experienced, argued about, analyzed, and narrated their wars since the mid-20th century. It leads back to the Vietnam War and to the growing public awareness of many soldiers' struggles in their readjustment to civil life. It reminds the reader of domestic strife between hawks and anti-war protesters, and of the belief to have 'lost' or to have failed to 'finish the job': 2 days earlier, Traversa had commented on Senator Harry Reid's pessimistic statements on Iraq and had been reflecting on the effort, progress, and goals of the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq since then (Traversa, "The War Is Over!"). In its focus on the returning soldier's emotional state, the discussion of this questionnaire also illustrates the progress in military psychology and the growing public awareness of war trauma since Vietnam. At the same time, it reveals the military's ongoing suspicion of fraud and its corresponding distrust against veterans who report emotional problems. Finally, it connects the issue of war trauma with the relationship between the military and civil society, and the diverse efforts regarding veteran's affairs in the current conflicts: Although Traversa and his fellow soldiers observed a growing lack of concern for the war and those who fought it among both civilians and politicians, this article will read his serial war narrative as exemplary of the efforts among American civil society not to repeat the mistakes of Vietnam and to embrace and support their soldiers, regardless of the political quarrels over these wars.

The questionnaire Traversa faced is part of an elaborate system of monitoring the mental fitness of soldiers that rests on the conclusions from veteran-related psychological research and therapy. The massive traumatization among Vietnam veterans began to have a noticeable cultural impact and became a public concern in the 1980s when it entered popular culture, i.e. in the movie character John Rambo. Psychotherapists, although aware of combat-related stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) since the emergence of their discipline during and after World War I, have developed an intricate terminology, diagnosis, and viable therapeutic approaches only after Vietnam (cf. Wilson, Harel and Kahana 1988; Hoge 2010, 1–37). Scholars have identified technological and social changes in warfare (i.e. duration of combat periods, blurring of combat and resting phases, blurring between enemy combatants, and civilian bystanders), as well as altered homecoming experiences, as major components in their explanation of stress and trauma among Vietnam veterans.

Psychologists describe war stress as a combination of unique stressors in war *and* homecoming. The latter is understood as "sanctuarial stress": Many Vietnam veterans experienced their homecoming as a breach of promise at the hands of civil society, leaving them with a feeling of betrayal. They felt that American society not only failed to appreciate their service but actively denied them their

recovery and reintegration in the form of public welcome ceremonies, such as parades (cf. Parson 1988, 251–253). If soldiering is viewed thus as a social contract, the veterans' homecoming stress derived from civil society's failure to thank them for their service collectively, to show empathy for the hardships and sacrifice they endured on behalf of society, and to welcome them back into the fold of 'normal' civil activities and behavior. Psychology and military science have since referred to archaic 'Western' traditions, as well as to the warrior traditions of indigenous cultures, to emphasize the role of ceremonial reintegration and community support for the well-being of veterans.

The outbreak of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq led to concerns about a renewed rise of PTSD and war stress. It is thus typical for the public discourse on the recent war experience that texts such as Marine Col. Tim Hanifen's "Three Gifts You Can Give Returning Veterans" demanded an active effort by civil society to offer returnees "understanding, affirmation, and support" (Hanifen 2003). Doug Traversa's story is significant in this context, because he represents a generation of US soldiers who actively engage in a public discourse with one another, with their families, but also – and probably most important – with the general public, via the internet. At the time of his return from Afghanistan, there had already been hundreds of soldiers who appropriated recent Web 2.0 technology to write about their war experience in a weblog, and he had experienced the military's efforts to restrict and control this eruption of individual expressions from the war zone. This article will illustrate how these milblogs provide opportunities for soldiers to stay in contact with their communities and narrate their war experience, and how civil society provides the ceremonial public "understanding, affirmation, and support" required for the (re-)integration of veterans.

Merging observations and paradigms from Native American studies and military psychology with a historical and cultural-studies perspective, I argue that milblogging is a vehicle for soldiers to cope with their war experience through 'performed narratives,' and to thus navigate between their respective civil and military realities. Blogging conveys similar cultural work as traditional indigenous warrior ceremonies and allows for a public, ceremonial discourse between soldiers and civil society on the conduct, living conditions, and goals of war. The social, cognitive, and spatial gaps between the norms, rules, and symbols of civil life at home and military life in the war zone, experienced in the transition from civilian to soldier to veteran, require guidance that traditional ceremonies provide. The more prominent these gaps are, the more stressful will be the transitions, and the more important will be the guidance and community support for the initiate who undergoes them. Narrating one's experience is part of Native ceremonies, military critical incident debriefings, as well as current psychological and social readjustment programs for returned veterans. It serves to sort out

memories and emotions. The cultural work of milblogging lies in the reduction of these gaps while the soldier is still in the war zone, via a forum that is at once public and private. The narrative and interactive features of Web 2.0 enhance this process of meaning-making between military and civil society on both an individual and a collective level.

In the following, I will illustrate the functions of war narration in Native American warrior tradition and military psychology. A close reading of Traversa's blog from Afghanistan will then detail how milblogging continues and further develops traditional war narratives by emphasizing a) the influence of pop culture on the sense of 'normalcy' for the soldier, b) the ritualistic elements in the interaction between bloggers and their audience, and c) the notion of a larger mission in which bloggers assume roles as mentors, mediators, and educators through their texts that are critical for their sense of community.

2 Ceremonial Storytelling in Native Ceremonies and Military Psychology

In Native American societies that have developed warrior traditions, warrior ceremonies are integral parts of the ritual separation of war and peace. War, even when considered necessary, is seen as a radical disturbance of the natural order and must be prevented from encroaching onto everyday life. This philosophy acknowledges the emotional strain on individuals who make the transition from civilian to warrior and veteran and who face these social, cognitive, and spatial gaps because of the different rules, codes of conduct, and notions of 'normal' learned behavior between civil life at home and military life in the war zone. Native warrior cultures, therefore, ritually prepare their members for the war experience. They also take ceremonial precautions to welcome the returning warriors back into the community, help them readjust to civil life, sort out their war experience, and employ this experience for the benefit of the community. Cleansing, honoring and healing ceremonies thus work to help individual veterans overcome war stress, but they also help veterans and members of the community mediate between their different experiences and, therefore, ensure reintegration and a symbolic return to 'normal' (Holm 1986, 243; Usbeck 2012a, 272–274).

Many of these ceremonial transitions are conducted through a narration or performance of the veteran's war experience. This could be done in sweat lodge ceremonies which, by now, have expanded from the Northern Plains into a pan-tribal practice, in talking circles, or in elaborate dances which mime the warrior's experience (Viola and Campbell 2008, 142, 151; Silver and Wilson 1988, 344;

O'Neill 1999). The healing power of such ceremonial performed narratives lies in the reciprocity of narration and feedback which mediates general community values such as “acceptance, courage, truth, and spirituality” (“Native American Veterans: Storytelling for Healing” 2012). The listening, responding, and formally applauding audience fulfills vital roles in the welcome and reintegration of the veterans: They share the experience and absorb the corresponding emotional burdens, they signal their support in overcoming stress, they demonstrate to future warriors that their efforts will be acknowledged and honored, and they affirm new status for the returnees within the community (Silver and Wilson 1988, 346). This public ceremonial acknowledgment through a performance of narration and response is a major reason why Native American soldiers have a higher chance to recover from combat-related stress and PTSD than their non-Native counterparts (“Practitioners” 2005, D1; Holm 1995, 83–84). Suggestions that this cycle of ceremonial interaction could serve non-Native soldiers as well have fused with ideas from the emerging field of narrative therapy for military psychology since the 1990s (Holm 1986, 248; Tick and Hill 2013; R.M. Wilson et al. 2009). They also informed projects emphasizing the ceremonial side of readjustment and war narration, i.e. in sweat lodge ceremonies or in talking circles, resilience programs, and camp-outs (Tick 2005; Scurfield and Platoni 2013a, b).

Milblogging combines the functions of these approaches and thus offers a forum for complementary emotional support for soldiers from within the war zone, before they actually return and must navigate the challenges of readjustment. Blogs allow soldiers to keep contact not only with their family but with their general social environment; bloggers might even expand their social networks as their blogs gain visibility. Although, unlike Native ceremonies, blogs are not meant to fulfill spiritual functions, the interaction in milblogs can be described as ritualistic if we understand rituals as symbolic communication that aims at enhancing intragroup cohesion and that can be either formalized, prescribed, repetitive, stylized, sacralized, or a combination thereof. The more elements are combined, the more ritualistic will be the communication (cf. Grimes 2011, 10–14).

Bloggers take time to sort out recent events and experiences through writing. These periods often become cherished, highly self-conscious moments of reflection in their everyday routine. Narrative therapy argues that this process contextualizes traumatic experiences with one's emotions and integrates them into one's personality (cf. Pennebaker and Seagal 1999; Bolton et al. 2004). Milbloggers develop stylized and repetitive approaches to their audience, as in the introduction of regular blog features, or fixed phases for particular events and thoughts. The audience, in return, provides support, appreciation, and affirmation, often in stylized and repetitive phrases. Some even sacralize the bloggers by praising their service (and humbling themselves correspondingly) in narrative patterns

that amount to hero worship (Traversa, “Sgt. David Stephens”). “We have so many people praying for us, we’re probably saints already,” Traversa comments jokingly one day (Traversa, “From Cats”). While Native veterans gain new status upon their return and use it to employ their experience in new tasks within the community, bloggers often implement their accumulating war experience to assume new roles through their narratives, which they frequently express as a mission. Native returnees have frequently become healers, diplomats, or teachers; some bloggers act as mentors for younger soldiers who will soon deploy to the same posts, or as intercultural mediators by reporting on the culture and everyday life of the local people. These ceremonial exchanges of information and the emotional gestures of appreciation, mutual support, and community affirmation help diminish what I call the spatial, social, and cognitive gaps between civil and military life.¹ The following close reading will detail how a blogger ceremonially maintains his ‘civil self,’ discuss ritualistic elements in his interaction with his audience, and illustrate how his mission as a mentor and culture broker shapes his relationship with the blog community.

3 Afghanistan without a Clue

Air Force Captain Doug Traversa was assigned to a one-year deployment to Afghanistan in 2006 to support the training of the Afghan National Army’s logistics branch. He started his blog, *Afghanistan Without a Clue (AWAC)*, for several reasons: he wanted to “illustrat[e] what war was really like, both the mundane and the scary,” he felt he was not sufficiently prepared for his task (hence the blog’s title) and wanted to provide his replacements with details on what to expect, and he used this opportunity to fulfill his dream of writing a book (Traversa, E-mail to Usbeck, October 25, 2012; Traversa, “From Cats”). He posted extensive daily entries and eventually invited a few fellow soldiers, as well as a number of spouses and Afghan interpreters, to contribute their own segments to his posts. Their blog was featured at blog listings such as *milblogging.com* and in online newspapers such as *Doodlesbury’s “The Sandbox,”* and thus rapidly gained popularity. It was elected “Best Air Force Blog” at *milblogging.com* in 2006 and eventually exceeded 50,000 hits. Although Traversa was hardly ever involved in

¹ This is not to suggest that milblogging might be a stand-alone prophylaxis or treatment for PTSD, nor does this approach ignore the problems and isolation returning veterans currently face when looking for jobs or navigating the red tape of the VA system (cf. Klein 2013). Returnee’s blogs, such as Scott Lee’s *PTSD: A Soldier’s Perspective* (2013b) have their own therapeutic merits, but spatial limitations prescribe a focus on blogging from the combat zone in this article.

actual combat, his “daily commute” between the camp and Kabul’s airport posed the constant danger of an ambush on a route frequently targeted by Taliban insurgents. His blog is exemplary of many other such texts as it provides the range of approaches and choice of topics that allow US soldiers to blog legally from the combat zone today.²

The content of these posts covered daily life in the camp and city and the progress of the cooperation with the Afghan forces. Two recurring themes are dominant: First, Traversa discusses films, comics, sports, and TV-series at length, offering critical reviews in which he rarely relates to his military background and which obviously become a diversion, respite, or as he termed it, felt like an “escape” from the routines of military life in Afghanistan (Traversa, E-mail to author, October 25, 2012). Second, he relates his long conversations with his Afghan interpreters on their personal lives and memories of recent Afghan history, on Muslim traditions and customs, but also on American everyday life, culture, and politics. As such, he functions as a culture broker for both American civil society at home and for his interpreters and their social environment. The urgency with which both sides request more information affirms this role which apparently gives him an additional sense of purpose, of service to both communities, and a boost to morale during his deployment.

4 Showtime: Pop Culture as a Sanctuary in the War Zone

A major portion of the blog posts is dedicated to reports on Traversa’s soccer and poker games at Camp Phoenix and to his extensive reviews of movies, computer games and, particularly, Japanese anime films and manga comics. Over time, he installed regular segments such as the “Quote of the Day,” a quiz on film quotes ranging from *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* to *Monty Python*, *Sledge Hammer*, *the A-Team*, or *House, MD*. These segments actively engage his audience and invite participation and discussion.

This massive immersion in pop culture is a reflection of the author’s personal interests who talks about himself as a “geek” who “also loved sports” and who

² It must be noted, however, that Traversa had very good internet access on his large base, and that he was a captain in his mid-40s at the time of deployment, in contrast to the much more erratic access at smaller Forward Operating Bases and to the much lower average age of privates and NCOs in the combat teams, all of which would have an influence on frequency and length of posts and, possibly, writing style, in comparison. My thanks to Brian Schneider (Uni Konstanz) for his comments in this regard.

obviously enjoys this opportunity to pursue his interests despite his deployment (Traversa, “Genshiken”). Yet, this choice of topics may also be influenced by Operational Security requirements which prohibit any description of missions or weaponry that could give sensitive information to the enemy.³ If military censors and blog-monitoring commanding officers have the ultimate discretion to decide what counts as “sensitive,” pop culture at home would be among the few safe topics to discuss. Regardless of its motivation, this topic is an efficient counterweight to the erratic mix of military routine in the camp and the lurking dangers on Traversa’s daily route beyond the camp’s perimeter. By conversing with his audience on films, sports, and games, he retains a sense of what is considered ‘normal’ in civil life. He thus works to diminish, if not bridge, the gap between his alternating civil and military realities and “dial down” war-related reflexes and anxieties at night. Psychologists discuss the necessity to gradually “dial down” these “warrior responses” for a successful readjustment to civil life after the soldier’s return (Hoge 2010, xiv–xv). A nightly respite from the dangers and immersion into the fictional reality of anime and comics during his deployment may have helped Traversa to keep the overall level of stress during his deployment relatively low and replenish morale. He introduces this effect to his readers as he relates a phone conversation with his wife about his excessive spending on anime DVDs: “Don’t begrudge me my anime. That and my blog have helped me keep my sanity.” Glad about his wife’s understanding, he explains to the audience: “The key to survival here is to have something to keep you occupied. Even if it’s Japanese cartoons” (Traversa, “More Fame for Rambo”).

In another post he describes his strict regimen of routines as a way to balance out the constant alertness against an ambush on the road and adds that these routines extend into the soldiers’ off-duty hours: “Then you are off to the multitudinous recreational and entertainment activities available here. Or in my case, onto my computer, my lifeline to sanity” (Traversa, “The Daily Commute”). Although the daily quotes, featured films, and the anime often have a military setting, the “dialing down” via pop culture becomes clear further when Traversa relates his impressions after watching *Black Hawk Down*: “It was an excellent movie, though it hit too close to home. I probably shouldn’t watch graphic war movies while I’m over here. Too depressing” (Traversa, “The Thanksgiving Football Massacre”). Traversa’s immersion in pop culture maintains his contact with civilian reality and with a civilian audience, and it serves to counterbalance stress in the war zone. His narration of the experience and his self-conscious, frequently meta-narrative performance as a blogger thus resemble the stress-control functions

³ For discussions of Operational Security (OPSEC) in the use of social media, cf. Roering 2012, 88–95; U.S. Army, “Army Social Media Handbook 2012.”

of Native warrior ceremonies and of writing projects in narrative therapy and veteran readjustment.

The blog's meta-narrative features further support this observation, because the author playfully performs his role as a writer, editor and, eventually, as a show host during his off-hours at night. Traversa regularly documents and actively pursues the growth of *AWAC's* readership and its interconnectedness in the blogosphere. From the beginning, he refers to icons of American popular culture, such as the *Daily Show* with Jon Stewart or the *Colbert Report*, and expands his blog in reference to shows and media by introducing and advertizing new segments and contributors (i.e., Traversa, "From Cats"). The blog begins to resemble a serial TV-show, almost an alternative reality, in itself, evident in the fun the fellow writers have once a group of regular contributors has formed:

When we went in the hut both Drew and Rat started writing their posts for the night, and I walked up and down the hall acting like the editor from Spiderman [...] chomping on my cigar yelling, "Come on, we've got a deadline to meet!" (Traversa, "An Obscene Quantity")

Traversa stimulates his readers to contribute comments, cross-links, and – most blatantly – votes in his campaign for "Best Milblog of the Year," by sprinkling in transmedial references to the *Daily Show*, and especially to Stephen Colbert's 2006 campaign among his fans to take over the Hungarian government's poll for the naming of a bridge across the Danube (Traversa, "Stumping"). Photos feature his role as a blogger, and each entry details the music he listens to while writing, which offers a virtual sound track for the show (i.e., Traversa, "Alien Nine"). His regular segments resemble Stewart's "Moment of Zen" or Colbert's "Alpha Dog of the Week." Being his own show host, the author controls the discourse (within OPSEC limits) and creates a reality for himself in which he "dials down" the reality and impressions of his military surroundings. The notion of alternating realities increases as he realizes that some experiences seem to suggest he is enacting live *M.A.S.H.* episodes (Traversa, E-mail to Usbeck, October 25, 2012). Through all this playful media immersion, he serves his personal interests and actively maintains, even expands his social environment.

5 Ceremonial Storytelling: Community-Building through Interactive Rituals

Scholars of war stress emphasize the importance of community support for successful veteran readjustment. Recent new media studies and psychology have

discussed the therapeutic and bonding effect of audience feedback in blogs, suggesting that blogging can be a tool to enhance such community support (Grossman 2008; Altena, Notermans and Widlok 2011). If “[t]o comment on a blog is to assert not only that you have read the post, but also that you care enough about the post to *act* in some manner [emphasis in original]” (Booth 2010, 48), this “continuous feedback loop provides another level of potentially therapeutic work” (Grohol 2010, 71) and promotes the overall well-being of a blogger, regardless if the blog is part of a guided therapeutic program or simply a pastime activity. In the same way that Native audiences repeat a warrior’s dance steps or break out in formal(ized) applause, milblog audiences provide emotional feedback and advice on a personal level. Yet, they also do it as a self-constituted community, be it that of caretakers, war supporters, or simply ‘the nation,’ in an emotional inclusive gesture toward the milblogger. Traversa actively invites such feedback and constitutes the fellow bloggers and their audience as parts of the same community in the segment “Letters to the Editor”: “As I’ve said before, *AWAC* is like a family. We want to hear from you” (Traversa, “Alien Nine”).

The interaction in *AWAC* illustrates this emotional feedback loop: Civil support groups engage with milbloggers in ritualized community-building.⁴ This activity must be seen in reference to Hanifen’s request for “understanding, affirmation, and support” for returning soldiers. Multiple civil associations and volunteers have organized in recent years to provide active support to the troops in the war zone and upon their return. Groups such as Soldiers’ Angels “adopt” soldiers, post encouraging comments and ask for care package wish lists (“Soldiers’ Angels” 2013). Several such supporters contribute to *AWAC*. They regularly express their support and gratitude in stylized language by repeating particular phrases even though previous comments used similar wording, and they offer stylized comments to particular statements by the bloggers. One commenter uses her’s as a morale boost after Traversa pessimistically reflected on the progress of the war:

Thank you for all you do. I hope you know how much you are thought of. America would not long be America without our military. And be sure, we are all not asleep! I hope you can feel our love and prayers! (Traversa, “More Fame.” Donna, February 18, 2007, 05:59 P.M.)

Like most comments, this statement explicitly expresses thanks and quantifies the appreciation and awareness of the soldiers’ work among the people at home.

⁴ In Booth’s sense of “narrativity,” ritualized community-building is evident in the playful mutual text-production among bloggers and audience, in *AWAC*’s self-presentation as a show, and in Traversa’s reference to “fan mail” (Traversa, “Off-Roadng”). For an example of this perspective from a different blog, cf. Usbeck 2012b, 108–111.

It contextualizes the soldier's service by referring to the role of the military for the nation's well-being, and it expresses civil society's awareness of the soldier's sacrifice.

Another regular commenter states that supporting the troops should be seen as a fulfilment of the social contract between soldiers and society:

THAT makes me a part of the TEAM doing MY part. We CANNOT expect our military to serve as they do unless WE provide moral support for them as well as for their families [emphasis in original] (Traversa, "Fifth Place!"Leta, January 24, 2007, 10:24 P.M.).

These mantra-like expressions are sent and perceived as individual, very personal voices, by which the commenter assures the blogger of the personal bond. By repeating phrases from earlier comments of other readers, commenters constitute their own membership in the community. The sum of repeated phrases appears to be the amplified voice of the community, to both the bloggers and their audience. The intra-group bonding in these comments thus derives from the interweaving of personal and collective affirmation via stylized and formalized language, a function that Native ceremonies employ as well but that military parades could not because they fail to link soldiers and audience on a personal level.

6 The Soldier as a Culture Broker

Native American veterans gain status after their return because their communities perceive war experience – i.e., decision-making and carrying out tasks under stress, but also the ability to make ethical judgments between 'good' and 'evil' – as beneficial traits for the community. Native veterans employ this experience for new tasks in community service. Their knowledge of war and chaos serves to counter, or revert, violence and chaos in civil life. Milbloggers adopt new roles, as well. Many understand blogging not only as a pastime but as a mission and, by doing so, engage the dilemma soldiers in the current conflicts face: They are supposed to serve simultaneously as police officers, killers, peacekeepers, ambassadors, developers, and humanitarian aid workers. Choosing a personal mission to assume a role perceived as positive, creative, and unambiguous obviously helps soldiers come to terms with this dilemma. This is true for both returned veterans and for blogging combat soldiers. Scott Lee began to blog about effects of PTSD after his return, eventually embracing his writing as a mission to help caretakers, relatives, and other PTSD clients to understand and address their challenges (cf. Lee 2013b; Lee, E-mail to Usbeck, January 28, 2013a). The non-profit organization

Team Rubicon hires veterans to employ their “warrior reflexes” as first responders in disaster relief missions (“Disaster Response” 2013). Doug Traversa saw his blog mission in the education and mentoring of future US logistics trainers for the ANA, but also in intercultural education and mediation. For both returnees and deployed milbloggers, their missions of community service offer personal emotional rewards and an additional embrace from their communities.

Traversa frequently posts long, often verbatim, reports on his discussions with Afghan interpreters. His readers enjoy these intercultural encounters and request more such posts. Topics range from religious practices, politics, and history to everyday life, i.e., courtship, marriage, pastime activities, or cultural customs in the US and Afghanistan. When they reach yet another transcultural barrier one day, he explains to his interpreter Hamid: “True, it is not like that in America, but the point of my blog is to educate Americans on our cultural differences” (Traversa, “Terrible Resolve”). Later, readers learn that Traversa wants them to “get to know some of the Afghans intimately” because he understands this kind of bonding as part of the war effort (Traversa, “What is Most Important?”). He thus works toward intercultural understanding among both Americans at home and Afghans in the war zone, allowing him to assume an unambiguous role as mediator and educator for which both sides express their desire and their gratitude. The gratification thus gained adds to the community-building effect of blogger-audience interaction.

7 Conclusion

Milblogs allow soldiers to narrate their war experience in a public setting, sort out memories and emotions, and come to terms with their role and tasks in the war. Blogs maintain links with the soldier’s home environment and, as such, with the pleasures and seemingly banal concerns of civil life. In the narration and feedback between soldiers and their audience, both sides form and affirm a sense of community and reassure each other of their respective contributions to both the task at hand and to their relationship. These cultural, social, and therapeutic functions of milblogs are comparable to those of Native warrior ceremonies, and they fulfill a similar cultural work, even though these texts evolve while the soldiers still remain in the combat zone and before they face any potential challenges of readjustment. In both warrior ceremonies and milblogs, the cognitive and social gaps between civil and military experience are being diminished and the social contract, that is, the promise of an exchange of civic service for public appreciation and eventual reintegration, is affirmed.

The parallels in the cultural work of these Native and non-Native performed war narratives illustrate the current efforts to re-establish and maintain a social link between the US military and civil society, and to avoid the mistakes made during and after Vietnam. Although Doug Traversa, about to return home, to undergo his debriefing and to fill out the ominous questionnaire on his emotional state, voiced his concern that civil society increasingly ignored the war and that the politicians' partisan interests often contradicted the efforts of the soldiers on the ground, his own and other milblogs demonstrate a change in the perception of soldiering since Vietnam. As Traversa states at the end of his tour: "Rest assured, this is one group of military types who know they are appreciated, loved, prayed for, and cared about" (Traversa, "Thanks"). Despite the continuously high numbers for PTSD among US veterans, the rampant complaints about the red tape of the VA system and the reservations from potential employers, and despite the political controversies over the wars' justification, conduct, and goals, milblogs are an example for the willingness in American society to come to terms with the current conflicts by discussing them with their soldiers, rather than merely blaming them for war's ills. This discourse provides individual, subjective, and bottom-up perspectives of war in a public forum that were previously not available. It shows how diverse, sometimes overlapping interest groups constitute themselves as communities in relation to the national war effort. Milblogs thus not only help individual soldiers sort out their own war experience, they illustrate how American society appropriates the new media for public discourse and for community self-affirmation.

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