

# “Don’t Forget about Us, Because We Can’t Forget You”: A Narrative Approach to the Concept of ‘Community’ in American Soldier Blogs<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The following contribution interweaves cultural-anthropological and media studies approaches to analyze the concept of ‘community’ in a phenomenon of the new media, the so-called ‘milblogs.’ These communities use the blogosphere to create and distribute a master narrative about the relationship of American civil society with its military and, thus, about how segments of American society attempt to come to terms with the War on Terror. The contribution emphasizes the interaction of bloggers with their audience in the narrative process of imagining, proclaiming, and nurturing such communities.

## Introduction

American military operations of the early twenty-first century, commonly known as the ‘Global War on Terror,’ have been accompanied by a number of changes in both technology and cultural practice among the societies involved in those operations. New technologies—such as e-mail, websites, or weblogs—accelerated communication across the globe. American soldiers, deployed in the Middle East and Afghanistan, used these technologies to stay in contact with home. While public debate erupted in the US about the motivations for and, increasingly, about the conduct of the War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq, soldiers began to participate in the public debate and gained immediate and widespread attention. An unprecedented wave of public description of,

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1 The title quotes an appeal of a milblogger to his audience in which he addresses the American public in general, assuming a perspective of speaking for all American soldiers deployed overseas. The blogger, Lee Kelley, titled his blog *Wordsmith at War*. His address to the American public was republished in Matthew Burden’s collection *The Blog of War*. The above statement is representative of the soldier blogs’ cultural work of reconciling and negotiating between military and civil society which this study scrutinizes (Burden, *Blog of War* 248).

commenting on, and discussion about these military operations took place. Soldiers with digital cameras, webcams, and other technological gadgets, provided with Internet access on their overseas bases, began to publish their experience almost instantaneously, and thus offered an on-the-ground insider perspective of war to a globalized audience. As one of the protagonists termed it, authors of such soldier blogs, commonly known as ‘milblogs,’ “[offer] unfettered access to the War on Terror in their own words” (Burden, *Blog of War* 4).

This new genre of instantly published war diaries resulted in a number of sociocultural developments. It enabled soldiers to sort out their experience and share it with families, friends, and complete strangers. It helped keep contact between soldiers and civil society by enabling discussions on films, music, and other aspects of everyday life at home and in the war zone, in addition to providing instant online reporting of war news. It also enabled political debates on the war and how it was conducted among members of civil society and the soldiers who were waging this war.

This contribution will argue that milblogs constitute the establishment of a community that uses the blogosphere to create and distribute a master narrative about the relationship of American civil society with its military and, thus, about how segments of American society attempt to come to terms with the War on Terror. In the following, I will explore how the online interaction between soldiers and their audience via the weblog reinforces a sense of community, how community building is enabled and expressed, and what implications these constructions of community have for US culture in the Internet age as well as for psychological aspects of contemporary soldiering. The milblog negotiates community on a number of levels: It enables instant communication between soldiers, friends, and family, and, being public, it simulates ‘family’ to a wider audience. It bridges the gap between military and civil society by allowing individual soldiers to participate in civil society via online access to popular culture and through the means of instant communication. Finally, it allows blogging soldiers and their audience to imagine a community—and to jointly construct its narrative—by engaging in vivid and interactive conversation that enables expressions of mutual emotional benefit and builds personal(ized) relationships.

For an understanding of the different concepts of ‘community’ that inform my reading of milblogs, I will briefly discuss approaches to the concept of community from perspectives of both cultural history and (new) media studies. Both influence questions of group identity and belonging that will be necessary for an understanding of

milblogging. I will then ‘test’ selected aspects of ‘community’ from these earlier studies on the example of the blog post “Taking Chance Home,” posted on the milblog *BLACKFIVE* in April 2004 (Burden, “Taking Chance Home”).<sup>2</sup> My analysis will investigate the audience reaction to the blog post, which was commented on and cross-linked several times within the blogosphere before eventually being turned into a feature film. Among considerations of how the blog audience used “Taking Chance” to express their self-consciousness as a community will be a discussion how, through their interaction with the original post and with one another, the blog community actively constructed the narrative of “Taking Chance.”

## ‘Community’ in Cultural History and New Media Studies

Aspects of community and community construction have abounded in cultural as well as sociological discussions of group identity over the past few decades. In the 1980s, such debates about the formation of group identity received critical input through works that featured approaches with backgrounds in cultural or intellectual history. Among the most influential were Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) and Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983). In their cultural-historical classics, Anderson as well as Hobsbawm and Ranger employ the term ‘community’ as a tool to discuss other concepts and to set other criteria. Hobsbawm and Ranger use it to define ‘tradition,’ while Anderson, though arguing over ‘true’ or ‘false’ communities, merely states that “all communities larger than primordial villages with face-to-face contact [...] are imagined” (6). Yet both works implicitly supply criteria for their understanding of what a community is: Ranger argues that a “‘traditional’ community” can be identified by its rituals (214). Anderson defines various types of imagined communities, discusses the importance of community boundaries which identify both members and outsiders (7), and stresses language as an important marker in the development of a community (39-44). When Anderson discusses nations imagining themselves, he also scrutinizes the way this imagining changes the narrative of group consciousness, group cohesion, and collective memory (xiv). His narrative

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2 The original blog post is titled “Taking Chance Home.” In the 2006 book collection of his blogs, Matthew Burden gives the title as “Taking Chance,” and the eventual HBO film uses the latter title as well. One could speculate that this adjustment was made for the sake of wordplay (as the blog is about a Marine named Chance Phelps), but neither blog post nor book give hints to such an intent. One commenter who participated in the action on which “Taking Chance” is anchored expressly states “no pun intended” when saying that he “only got the chance to meet him [Chance Phelps] once” (‘Lcpl Lemiszki,’ December 27, 2004, at 09:50 p.m. qtd. in Burden, “Taking Chance Home”).

reading of imagining a community thus supports the analysis of community building in and around milblogs. Equally influential for an understanding of community in milblogs will be his stress on limitations of community (resulting in gestures of inclusion and exclusion) and his emphasis on rituals and expressions of comradeship to mark membership in a community.

With the emergence of the Internet, scholars in the social sciences began to scrutinize users of online implementations and discussed their group cohesion by using the concept of '(virtual) community,' while trying to establish community criteria within the scope of their disciplines. Globalization enhanced the urgency of such discussions because it necessitated a new understanding of group cohesion beyond the confines of the 'nation' and the nation-state. Subsequent scholarship on the new media has been very explicit in its uses and definitions of community. These works, mainly with a media studies or sociology background, established different levels of analysis due to the communications technologies on which the communities under study are based. On one level, a community is defined by the relationship between its users; on another, it is defined by technological opportunities and limitations. Both levels have an impact on the understanding of community in this study.

For blog scholars such as Jill Walker Rettberg, the system of hyperlinks and tracking devices enables two-way conversation between blog users, thus indicating two-way conversation as an important community marker (58-61). Her example shows the understanding of the links between individual blogs within the Internet as one level on which community can be established, and the relationship between blogger and audience as the other. As my analysis of "Taking Chance" will exemplify, both levels influence the scope of the audience of a particular milblog and the topics being discussed, as well as the style and debating culture. In addition, although danah boyd's discussion of the 'invisible audience' as one of the features of social networks (cf. Rettberg 75-77) is more designed to satisfy the need to integrate the technological aspect into sociological analysis, it points towards a unique feature of online communities: Knowing that face-to-face contact is often impossible, bloggers nevertheless are aware of their audience and develop unique methods to establish a personal relationship with it. The technological ability of online posting and feedback, then, can provide the ground for such a personal relationship as a key factor in a community.

In an essay about the virtual communities of the blogosphere, Anita Blanchard uses an empirical approach to discuss features of ‘community’ in a blog context and to distinguish the ‘sense of community’ which blog users develop. When the emergence of the Internet triggered the first discussions of ‘virtual communities,’ it was argued that, not being inherent and not being free of interest (as Anderson’s communities were said to be), a virtual community would be defined by social benefits, such as positive emotional exchange, and that its members were driven by an urge to sustain that relationship. Thus, Blanchard identifies feelings of membership; feelings of mutual influence, integration, and fulfillment of needs; and a shared emotional connection as criteria for a sense of community among blog users. While some researchers would grant blogs only limited status as a virtual community on these grounds, I understand these features as a confirmation of earlier studies which stated two-way conversation and emotional exchange on a personal level as necessary criteria. Graham Lampa argues in a similar way when he uses Anderson’s imagined communities as a foil for discussing blogs.

More important to my study, however, is Lampa’s observation that bloggers imagine their community, much like nineteenth-century newspaper readers imagined theirs, by turning the act of posting blogs, following links, and commenting on blogs into a ritual, reinforcing the sense of community through the knowledge that all other members of that community perform the same ritual regularly. In addition to the ritual of reading the newspaper (Anderson) and of posting, reading, and commenting (Lampa), I find it important to look at the ritualistic aspects of reassuring each other of membership in the community and of amplifying the message—the master narrative of that community—by repeating it in comments or by agreeing to earlier such comments. Thus, the sense of community in milblogs can not only be detected in the number of hits a particular post has but is rather expressed by the number of similar comments to it. The master narrative of a blog community evolves through the interaction of blogger and commenters, and in their massive contribution to the comments section, the audience helps shape this narrative and—in doing so—reassures itself about its active role in shaping it.

My study of milblogs, then, will discuss the imagined community of blogging soldiers and their audience by analyzing patterns of determining markers such as a sense of shared experience, two-way conversation and mutual emotional exchange indicating a personal relationship, the mutual fulfillment of needs, and signs of ritual or ceremony in these exchanges. It will consider two levels of analysis: One, the

relationship within the system of blogs, i.e., the links, cross-references, and expressions of individual participants about their perceived position in the blogosphere and the system of milblogging. Two, I will discuss the relationship between individual bloggers and their audience to determine in how far such a relationship goes beyond the online communication between friends and family and in how far this relationship matches the features of ‘community’ discussed above.

## ‘Taking Chance’: A Report on the Last Journey of a War Casualty Grows beyond Media Boundaries

On April 27, 2004, the milblog host Matthew C. Burden published a story titled “Taking Chance Home” on his blog at [www.blackfive.net](http://www.blackfive.net). *BLACKFIVE*, both title of the blog and call sign/user name of its host, can be described as a website about milblogging in which the host selects and publishes posts from other milblogs or letters deemed remarkable and worth featuring, along with posts from a team of authors who discuss military affairs and military politics. Features include the introduction of individual soldiers as well as campaigns to support the troops abroad. The story was originally written by Lieutenant Colonel Michael Strobl of the US Marine Corps, who had volunteered to escort the remains of Marine PFC Chance Phelps from the Air Force base in Dover, Delaware, to his hometown in Dubois, Wyoming, in early April 2004 (Burden, “Taking Chance Home”). Phelps had been part of a Marine infantry unit in Iraq, serving as a turret machine gunner when his convoy ran into an ambush west of Baghdad. He was fatally wounded in the course of the incident and died shortly thereafter.

Strobl explains his task as follows: “The military provides a uniformed escort for all casualties to ensure they are delivered safely to the next of kin and are treated with dignity and respect along the way.”<sup>3</sup> In his blog post, Strobl meticulously describes each stage of the journey, how the casket was transported, who handled it, whom Strobl met and how they treated both the casket and him as its escort. He illustrates in great detail every military ceremony, such as special salutes, at every tour stop. Readers learn about transportation formalities at several airports, about the transfer of the casket from

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3 Regulations for referencing blog sources are still somewhat blurry. Throughout my discussions of Strobl’s account, I will not place references for individual quotes since the post does not offer line or paragraph numbering and since these quotes can be easily found via search functions. However, I will identify comments by user name and the time code of the comment for easy identification and disambiguation. All of them are qtd. in Burden, “Taking Chance Home.”

airplane to car transport to horse-drawn caisson and, eventually, to its burial site near Dubois. In the process, Strobl encounters and observes ground personnel, flight attendants, pilots, and construction workers at airports, travelers, as well as diverse military authorities, before he finally meets Phelps’s family, mortuary staff in Dubois, and members of local institutions and of the community. He ends his narrative report describing the reception at the Dubois post of the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) on the night of the burial.

Throughout the story, Strobl’s style of writing is very plain and descriptive, his voice calm and to the point. Yet he frequently relates very strong emotions when he expresses his astonishment, pride, and joy about the respect with which the casket is being handled throughout the journey or how respectfully he is being treated by those who learn about his association with this escort mission, e.g. upon learning that airport personnel have upgraded his ticket to first class or when pilots override regulations to personally escort him between passenger and cargo areas of an airport. He also relates his emotional turmoil when describing his apprehension about meeting Phelps’s family and about the funeral ceremonies, and when he talks about the final get-together of veterans at the VFW post. Strobl’s formal style and the emotions he thus reveals are important when seen in the context of the emotions they cause among the audience, expressed in the comments.

Spreading out from *BLACKFIVE*, the original blog post immediately gained wide public attention. As of today, this post has received 144 comments at *BLACKFIVE*, 156 other websites or blogs have linked to it (which in turn has generated more comments on those sites), and 683 users have ‘liked’ it on *Facebook*.<sup>4</sup> Burden selected the post for publishing in his book *The Blog of War* with Simon and Schuster (Burden, *Blog of War*), which has since gone through hardcover, paperback, and Kindle e-book editions. An update post on *BLACKFIVE* from February 20, 2009, presents e-mails by a general who was involved in the ambush during which PFC Phelps was killed and by the corpsman at the Navy hospital who treated him. This update again triggered a large number of comments, was linked to by other sites, and was commented on (i.e., ‘liked’) by *Facebook* users (Burden, “[UPDATED] Chance Phelps Last Stand”). The update also cross-references the 2009 film adaptation of this story produced by HBO (called *Taking Chance*), featuring Kevin Bacon as Lt. Col. Strobl, and for which Strobl wrote the screenplay. The film adaptation has won a Golden Globe

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4 The blog post was last accessed during the writing of this contribution in September 2011.

and a number of other awards. Since 2006, the Chance Phelps Foundation, organized by the family and friends of Chance Phelps, has run fund-raising campaigns and events to support veterans and their families (*Chance Phelps Foundation*).

This explosion of public interest in the story, as well as the transgeneric distribution of it, are exemplary of the potential of milblogs to do cultural work, i.e., to help “construct the frameworks, fashion the metaphors, create the very language by which people comprehend their experiences and think about their world” (Lauter 23). “Taking Chance” did not only offer Michael Strobl a way to come to terms with his difficult task, it also opened an opportunity for Matthew Burden to bolster his mission of garnering public support for members of the military and of further bringing attention to the public’s “unfettered access to the War on Terror” via the soldiers’ own words (*Blog of War* 4). In addition, Burden’s posting of Strobl’s story allowed a wide audience to express their feelings about the US military’s role in the war, about their own relationship to the military, and, thus, about the war as such.

## Fragmented Public Spheres, Overlapping Communities

Michael Strobl’s report and the feedback it received exemplify my reading of community building and of how a sense of community is being expressed in the blogosphere. If we understand the new media as expressions of contemporary texts in which the recent fragmentation of the allegedly once unified public sphere becomes visible, all texts that have evolved around this original post can be read as manifestations of such fragmented ‘sub-publics’ who voice their respective interests and who assert their group cohesion by utilizing the new media, i.e., through the joint process of text creation which in turn constructs the narrative of these respective communities. Strobl’s account either directly addresses or helps assert a national and patriotic community, the community of the military and their family members, and the community of the Marines. Through their comments, the community of patriotic and conservative Americans asserts itself in relation to the post, while many other comments support and reinforce the assertion of the national, military, and Marine communities. In the sense of features of a ‘community,’ the interaction between blog post and comments indicates two-way conversation between the participants, mutual benefit, and personalization in the relationship between the participants. On both levels of blog communities, “Taking Chance” reveals strong interaction: The communication between blogger and commenters immediately becomes very vivid, and the cross-linking with other blogs and websites is very prominent so that the story spreads not

only to more and more people via the Internet but also across the boundaries of the media, eventually being published as part of both a book and a film.

The blog post discusses a large variety of places and people, thus representing the diversity that is part of American national self-consciousness, and I would argue that this representation serves to promote a sense of belonging to the national community. This sense of belonging would, in Anderson’s understanding, imply that blogger and commenters express their belief in a common history and a common national narrative. The story’s journey starts at Dover on the East Coast and continues via Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Billings, and Riverton to Dubois in the west. The people encountered during the trip include not only military but a wide variety of professions, adding to the sense of representing the entire nation and creating the impression that Private Phelps’s last journey is an opportunity for the entire nation to give their farewell,<sup>5</sup> similar to the ceremonial funeral train rides of the remains of Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy to their final burial sites. This impression is increased by the many comments which interpret this individual soldier’s commitment to the war and his fate as a symbol for the whole nation: “We are the luckiest Country on earth; we have the finest men and women protecting our freedoms! Thank you, all of you, for the many sacrifices you make” (‘Nancy,’ April 27, 2004, at 10:41 a.m.).

Within the self-assertion of the military community, Strobl’s account is permeated by references to military service. On the one hand, these references in both blog post and comments are assertions of military personnel and their families as one great military family. This becomes evident when the military’s care for its members is being discussed and when relatives of soldiers share their experience of concern for that relative’s safety and their longing for the soldiers’ return.<sup>6</sup> A few of the comments to “Taking Chance” are written from such a relative’s perspective, and many more abound in the blogosphere. They express their sense of belonging and their understanding of the US military as a family.<sup>7</sup> This sense of belonging implicitly turns the military relative of someone else into one’s own family member, thus creating a strong bonding among

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5 Strobl uses the term ‘the entire nation’ himself as he recalls listing all the tour stops to Phelps’s parents.

6 By 2011, an entire subgenre of milblogs in which relatives discuss their experience, the so-called ‘spouse blog,’ has emerged.

7 Mark Thompson, in his main article in *TIME*’s November 21, 2011, issue, goes as far as describing the American military as a “caste” whose separation from the rest of society is emphasized by an elitist sales pitch in the recruiting offices and by what he terms “garrison culture” (36).

relatives as well as among service members in the war zone who are aware of each others' relatives: "My thoughts and prayers go out to every family that has a member of their family serving in the military" ('Laura,' April 27, 2004, at 12:02 p.m.).

Many people shared their military experiences with Strobl along the way, among them the pilot on the flight from Minneapolis, who "talked of his service in the Air Force and how he missed it." Strobl eventually states that "[e]verywhere I went, people were continuing to tell me their relationship to the military." These strangers showed a heightened interest in establishing a cordial relationship with Strobl on the grounds of mutual experience and mutual sense of belonging. By establishing this link of mutual membership/common military experience, the people Strobl encounters express their sense of commonality with Strobl and Phelps—they begin to experience the story from 'within' instead of merely witnessing an event they have no personal stake in. It is more than a mere expression of sympathy, as those explanations of relationship with the military serve as a narrative sign of bonding. In relating these encounters to his audience, Strobl expresses his acknowledgment and appreciation of such signals.

The comments in "Taking Chance" reinforce the sense of belonging between audience and military community. Similarly to the people Strobl meets on the journey, a large number of commenters share their own experience with the military or establish this relationship by stating their rank, unit insignia, and branch of the military. One commenter, 'LC Curtis the Marine,' states that his homecoming from Saudi Arabia in 1991 at Bangor airport had been similarly warm (April 28, 2004, at 12:51 p.m.). Another one states: "[t]ook me back to my own days on an Army Funeral Detail. Lubricated the eyes, and reminded me of real sacrifice, courage, and honor" ('Bob,' April 29, 2004, at 08:49 a.m.). Yet another commenter, 'Ben Mira,' confirms that during his escort duty for a family friend, he shared the "range of emotions" which Strobl describes (May 25, 2004, at 12:21 a.m.). In these comments, belonging to the military is expressed as sharing experience, emotions, and values—and, thus, through an insider perspective.

On the other hand, these asseverations of familiarity with the military can not merely be seen as insider reassurances but also point towards the relationship of the military with civil society in the US in general. Expressions of cordiality with the military community become important if one considers the historic dimensions of public debate about war in US culture, especially in the context of Vietnam. Many sources discussing Vietnam veterans mention the experience of soldiers who, after

completing their tour of duty, were confronted with anti-war protesters at their port of entry in the US, who blamed them personally for atrocities committed against the Vietnamese populace (cf., e.g., Grossman 276-80). Seen in this context, Strobl’s encounters at the airport and the similar experiences shared by commenters must be read as individual, ceremonial acts of rapprochement between the military and American civil society, as a number of personal ceremonies which become merged into one ceremony; that is, a master narrative of the civil society supporting the troops.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to expressions of belonging to the military, the numerous references to the Marine corps are remarkable. Especially the latter part of Strobl’s post, his discussion of the reception at the local VFW chapter in Dubois, illustrates a sense of community within the branch of service. While the previous examples have pointed to the military at large as a community for many readers of the blog, the events at the VFW post confirm academic observations about the roles and loyalties within the relationships between Western societies and their military. Dave Grossman explains that combat situations require unit cohesion and an extreme level of trust among individual soldiers, leading to very strong bonding between soldiers of a unit and, thus, to a sense of community among the members of particular units (89). In “Taking Chance,” Strobl finds himself surrounded by veterans from different branches but emphasizes a situation in which a young Marine tells a story about his experience, while elder Marines, once having served in the same division, listen:

So, there I was, standing in a circle with three Marines recently returned from fighting with the 1st Marine Division in Iraq and one not so recently returned from fighting with the 1st Marine Division in Korea. I, who had fought with the 1st Marine Division in Kuwait, was about to gain a new insight into our Corps. [...] At that moment, in this circle of current and former Marines, the differences in our ages and ranks dissipated—we were all simply Marines.

He adds that he experienced the Marine Corps as a “special fraternity,” which did not necessarily become evident during ‘award ceremonies’ but in informal moments such as the one described here.

“Taking Chance,” besides assertions of a sense of community with the military, is also exemplary of expressions of a conservative and patriotic community. Time and

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8 Mark Thompson argues that the “almost reflexive” acts of thanking the troops at airports could be an expression of increased separation between civil society and the military rather than signs of empathy and interest, quoting retired Army Colonel Jack Jacobs: “We love the troops [...] because we don’t have to be the troops” (36).

again, comments discuss Strobl's account in the context of political debates accompanying the presidency of George W. Bush, which many commenters seem to experience as a simple pro-war versus anti-war and, implicitly, pro-Bush versus anti-Bush factionalism, using the blog post to rally to the cause. Earlier studies have discussed the potential of blogging to establish a sense of community because of their bias and of the dialogue with like-minded people (Kaye 131-37). A 2007 study on readers of war blogs argues that the audience of such blogs seems to position itself "predominantly right of center," that most war blog readers "support [...] the government's war efforts," and that they "harbor a distrust of institutions, particularly the media" (Johnson and Kaye 168). Although the authors point out that they do not want to generalize the blogosphere, their observations seem to be true for many commenters at *BLACKFIVE*.

A number of comments use the story about Chance Phelps to criticize, and even slander, political opponents. The accusations against opponents predominantly blame war critics for being selfish and for denying that the soldiers' commitment constitutes a sacrifice, not only for American civil society but for Iraqis as well. In doing so, these commenters place themselves firmly in the American tradition of seeing, fighting, and promoting war as a crusade; that is, wars in American history have been more popular for Americans when they were fought as 'righteous wars' for goals of universal value (cf. Snow and Drew 300-02; Moon 74). These considerations are revealed in comments about war critics: "Then you see on some sites where they try to diminish what he [Chance Phelps] did because they can not imagine anything bigger than themselves. They want his and LCPL Phelps' sacrifice to mean less because they refuse to consider that the world does not revolve around them" ('Cyclone,' April 27, 2004, at 08:52 a.m.). The phrase "bigger than themselves" occurs in numerous comments and milblog posts and seems to be generally used to denote that participation in the War on Terror is a commitment to an unselfish cause, that soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan directly protect American citizens at home, and that they also protect the citizens of these countries from dictators and insurgents. Political statements in the comments section of "Taking Chance" go as far as one commenter placing his side in a cultural struggle between Christianity and Islam: "And Damn the Liberals that think this will go away, not hardly after hundreds of years of hate for Christianity" ('Phil Ashley,' May 02, 2004, at 03:23 p.m.). The blog host and his audience community exert their sense of community by defending it against outsiders, i.e., people who do not express their like-mindedness: One week after the post, two newcomers enter the debate with comments

that are immediately identified as typical ‘liberal’ arguments: While a user called ‘Michelle’ says “[m]aybe it’s time to bring the boys home” (May 04, 2004, at 12:22 a.m.), another named ‘Thom’ remarks that it was “sad to see young men dying for old men’s wars” (May 04, 2004, at 12:42 a.m.). Although none of these statements contested the other commenters’ claims about unselfish sacrifice, the next comment is a response by the blog host, who finds it “sad to see you use this touching story about great citizens for your own disgusting purposes.” He excludes these commenters from further participation in the debate and, thus, from the community, saying: “I usually don’t ban people but don’t come here and turn the tribute to a Marine into some twisted and cowardly political statement. Not on my blog” (May 04, 2004, at 08:59 a.m.).

Many other comments establish similar boundaries to their community and exclude outsiders. Some confirm Kaye’s observation on the blog community’s aversion to traditional media (140-41): “The main reason I sent this out was for people to see the incredible patriotic reaction from everyday normal real Americans. We have a tendency to get caught up in the media bias and garbage that the moonbats spew forth and this is a shining example of what real folks think. In a way it restores my faith in the American people!” (‘JarheadDad,’ April 27, 2004, at 10:28 a.m.). This example shows the aversion to the media and the exclusion of those who are perceived to believe media news about the war. The exclusion works by implicitly denouncing political opponents as un-American and by self-asserting the commenters’ own community as “real Americans.” However, this assertion of community among the blog audience is not free of conflict and contradiction. By proclaiming ‘real’ America, one commenter identifies ‘real’ with ‘middle’ America, meaning the inland states and mostly conservative and rural areas, excluding the metropolitan and mostly liberal coastal states. Although Strobl did not differentiate between coastal and inland areas in his descriptions of respectful treatment and expressions of support for the military, a number of commenters use this distinction between ‘real’—i.e., ‘middle’—America and the allegedly un-American coasts.<sup>9</sup> One commenter claims that citizens of New York City would not appreciate the sacrifice of Phelps as much as this blog’s audience would, and others chime in (‘Dick,’ April 28, 2004, at 02:33 p.m.). Interestingly, the pro-military and patriotic community comes in conflict with assertions of conservative and rural America when a commenter interferes, asking: “Why use this heart rending article to bash New York?” He bolsters his argument by pointing to service members from the

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9 At one point, Strobl wonders if a soldier’s burial in Detroit or Los Angeles would draw such a large crowd of mourners as the one in rural Dubois.

New York area and thus likening them and their commitment to the war effort to that of Chance Phelps ('jack,' April 29, 2004, at 11:36 a.m.).

The discussion of comments and audience interaction concerning Strobl's post "Taking Chance" has identified a number of sub-public spheres which at times even constitute themselves as counter-publics. The following considerations will discuss the different features by which these sub- or counter-publics can be understood as communities and how they generate and nurture a sense of community among their members.

## Audience and Community, Audience as Community

My reading of milblogs and the cultural practice of community building combines cultural-anthropological as well as media studies and sociological approaches to 'community,' concentrating on the blogs' ability to enable personal relationships among their audience through two-way conversation, emotional exchange, and mutual benefit from this conversation. My analysis of community in milblogs is, furthermore, based on an understanding of such exchange as having ritualistic and ceremonial elements. Borrowing from recent developments in new media studies, reading the blog audience as a fan community opens yet another perspective on the cultural work of milblogs. "Taking Chance" is but one of many examples in which milbloggers and audience enter an intensive relationship and in which the audience plays an important role in creating the bond that generates a sense of community.

The comment function and the system of cross-links provide the technical foundation for interaction on a blog, and they are thus ideal for enabling two-way conversation. Although Michael Strobl and his audience do not use the comment function to engage in a consecutive exchange of statements and responses between blog author and audience as many other milblogs do, two-way conversation does indeed take place. Strobl shares his experience, Burden provides the medium for exchange by posting Strobl's account on his own popular blog, and from there on out the audience takes over. In the case of "Taking Chance," the important role of the audience becomes evident as their strong response to Strobl himself and to his account, to members of the military stationed overseas (and in general), to each other, and to the general public give the entire story its weight and support the sense of belonging among those who participate in shaping the story.

The conversation and its underlying cementation of communal self-consciousness can take many forms. In “Taking Chance,” the political debates are most obvious. The aforementioned comments on ‘middle America,’ on New York City, and on liberals function as the audience’s assurance for Strobl, for Phelps’s family, and for each other. When Burden exerts his authority as the blog host to exclude two commenters from the debate, he protects his own community of like-minded people by enforcing its boundaries, by ceremonially proclaiming and executing rules under which the community constitutes itself and distinguishes itself from outsiders. In the discussion about New York, insiders negotiate these rules among each other.

“Taking Chance” offers many other examples of two-way conversation typical of military blogs. Some of them concern the relationship between military and civil society. In many milblogs, intricate descriptions of everyday life in the military, or of the reasons behind particular procedures, generate vivid conversations between blogger and audience, which can be read as attempts to bridge the gap between soldiers and civil society from both sides and to create mutual understanding for each other’s living conditions. Similarly, the accounts of the soldiers’ leisure activities, their discussions of films, computer games, or sports events watched via the Armed Forces Network are signs that soldiers have an urge to stay in touch with everyday civil life, and that they actively work to keep a sense of what is considered ‘normal’ in comparison to the extreme conditions of military constraints and, especially, of combat.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, I would argue that the conversations both about the reality of military life at an overseas base and about seemingly unrelated issues of civil life are important aspects of soldiers trying to sustain the connection to their (home) community, as soldiers are keen to inform the audience about their life and are equally keen to stay in touch with the civil life they have left. The audience supports them in this endeavor by asking questions about the conditions abroad, such as food, housing, or local customs, and by responding to the soldiers’ comments about ‘normal’ cultural life at home. Although many of these examples play only a minor role in “Taking Chance,” the effort to explain military life to the civilian world, and to thus enable understanding among civilians, is visible in Strobl’s description of ceremonies and his explanation of military protocol during the journey.

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10 A vivid example of everyday civil life discussed in soldier blogs is Doug Traversa’s *Afghanistan Without a Clue*. The author shares his exploits at the PC game *Sid Meier’s Pirates* (“A Pirate’s Life”), engages in fan discussions about Japanese anime films with parts of his audience (“Japanimation”; “Anime Without a Clue”), and regularly posts comments on the current football season (“Halloween Candy”).

One could thus describe Strobl's role as that of a mediator and/or interpreter which is designed to preserve the fabric of the (national) community on a personal level. This dynamic becomes apparent when Strobl receives responses from members of the military who have been tasked with similar missions, who confirm his emotions, and who have shared his experience (e.g. 'LTC Maella Lohman,' May 08, 2004, at 12:36 p.m.). It is here that milblogs often take on the role of how-to or guidance texts. In many blogs, the audience treats the blogger as an expert and asks for advice in order to prepare for the same mission (in the case of soldiers preparing for their own overseas deployment). Sometimes the blogger is approached as a representative of all soldiers, or as an equivalent of a family member or friend, and is asked about his/her needs and wishes in order to better prepare for the inquirer's own future interaction with this friend or family member.<sup>11</sup> In "Taking Chance," one such occasion arises when a commenter named '1LT Andy, US Army' explains that, after returning home wounded, he had volunteered for such escort duties and that Strobl's account helped him prepare for his first mission (July 22, 2004, at 02:40 p.m.). Another commenter introduces herself as the aunt of one of the first casualties in the Iraq campaign and declares that "Taking Chance" gave her a measure of comparison to her own situation and helped her understand the procedure of returning the remains of a war casualty to his/her family. She thanks him "[for] let[ing] others know your feelings and for letting some of us who lost loved ones know of the care and respect they get on their journey home. [...] The family of Lance Corporal Thomas J. Slocum now knows how well respected he was all the way from Iraq to Colorado" ('MarySlocum,' May 01, 2004, at 03:59 p.m.). These examples, of course, provide an opportunity for particularly strong bonding because they emphasize a shared experience, and they do so via a very open expression of emotions, revealing a high level of trust among the blog users.

The establishment of a personal relationship among members of the milblog community does, therefore, not only work via two-way conversation but also via mutual emotional exchange. Obviously, since "Taking Chance" is centered on the death of Chance Phelps and on the ceremonies with which his military environment, his family, and his local community express their mourning, this story mostly hinges on emotions.

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11 Colby Buzzell thus gained fame in the first boom of milblogs in Iraq in 2003-2005. In his blog *My War*, published as a book in 2006, several readers ask him for advice: For instance, a mother inquires about how best to make her son comfortable when he returns, and the wife of a deployed soldier, resorting to Buzzell as a person of trust although he is a complete stranger, asks him to explain whether a soldier's assertions that the Internet connection at the base is not reliable means he actually does not want to talk to his partner (136-37).

It is important in this context that Strobl, despite his plain narrative style, reveals very personal feelings throughout his account. To begin with, he details his emotions and his interest to fulfill his task of escorting the remains of Chance Phelps properly. He states that he is “concerned about leaving him overnight in the Minneapolis cargo area.” He expected to be moved to tears once having to drape the flag over the casket and adds that he was “very nervous” about meeting Phelps’s parents, and that he “wasn’t sure how [he would] handle the moment” of preparing Phelps’s uniform once the casket was opened. During the burial, Strobl is close to tears because he realizes the finality of the burial and states that “as long as he was still moving, he was somehow still alive.” After the ceremony, Strobl “suddenly felt at once sad, relieved, and useless.” In some instances, he expresses his pride about Phelps, about the performance of other military during the ceremonies, and about the respect he is shown as a representative of the military by civilians along the route. In these emotional expressions, Strobl proclaims his membership to the military community, but he also exercises the aforementioned function of a mediator between civil society and the military: In his depiction of airport personnel and by relating their emotions about Phelps’s fate and about his own task to the blog audience, he anticipates the response of civil society (i.e., the blog audience) to his report about a military procession. It is not the milblogger who initiates an emotional conversation about the relationship between military and civil society, but the milblogger forwards the emotional expressions of civilians, experienced during the journey, to his audience—and accompanies them with an account of the solace, pride, and confirmation he felt through these expressions. He thus implicitly asks the blog audience to respond in the same manner. And, by implication, Matthew Burden enhances this anticipated audience reaction since he selected Strobl’s account for publication on his blog.

In all his descriptions of his own sadness, anxiety, and pride, Strobl engages in a paradox that weblogs in general constitute: the expression of very personal feelings and thoughts for the entire world to read. These personal feelings are related to the audience almost instantly and not, as in war memoirs, years after the event, in polished form and with much less danger of making oneself vulnerable. The audience’s reaction to Strobl’s account is an equally personal, equally emotional response which offers consolation and confirmation. The audience thus gives an equivalent response, the response Strobl invited by relating his encounters during the journey. The mutual exchange of emotional expressions functions as very personal signals of empathy between the individual bloggers and their commenters, but since it is a public exchange,

it also works as a reassurance of like-mindedness, of belonging, and of mutual benefit for the entire community. As Paul Booth points out: “To 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” (48). While all commenters want to express their thanks, agreement, and respect individually to Strobl for fulfilling his task (and to Burden for sharing Strobl’s story with them), their individual response reinforces the message of each preceding individual response, thus lending much more weight to the whole story.

## Blog Community and Ritual

I have interpreted Strobl’s description of his own rituals according to military protocol and the civilian witnesses’ reactions as signs of a ceremonial rapprochement between military and civil society. Yet ceremonialism can also support a reading of community in the observation of blog-audience interaction. I would argue that the repetitive individual assertions of respect for Strobl and Phelps, declarations of support for the troops (and implicitly for the policy of the US government), as well as revelations about emotional outbursts can be understood as rituals which vocalize, and strengthen, the sense of community between blogger and audience as well as among the blog’s audience.

Many commenters explicitly state that this account had moved them to tears: “I could not help but cry. When it came to the guys with horses, I just broke” (‘Alex in NJ,’ April 27, 2004, at 10:29 a.m.). In confirming and adding to earlier comments about crying, each new commenter shares their own experience, confirms like-mindedness, and thus contributes to the emotional, personal exchange within the community. Some commenters—mostly those who identify as male—seem to feel the need to justify their revelation of emotions and thus toy with typical images of masculine strength, restraint, and control: “This crusty fifty-one-year-old bachelor had to explain to co-workers why he was crying at his computer while eating his lunch” (‘Jim,’ April 28, 2004, at 07:58 p.m.). After telling Burden he both hated and loved him for selecting this post, one commenter felt the need to clarify that he meant “the brotherly love type” (‘Phil Winsor,’ April 28, 2004, at 02:27 p.m.).

The same is true for personal expressions of gratitude to Phelps and to Strobl, which sometimes address both as representatives of the entire military, as in the following example:

Thank you PFC Chance Pelps, your family and all of the “rough men” that have “ridden”, but no longer “ride” on my behalf. I am deeply humbled by such sacrifices. And forever grateful to those that “serve”, have served or sacrificed while their loved ones serve(d). Thank you Lt. Col Stobl [sic] for such a beautifully written and gripping account of this latest fallen HERO. (‘J.Callihan, Jr.,’ April 28, 2004, at 05:46 p.m.)

Similar to other emotional reactions to the story, these expressions of gratitude allow the individual commenters to share their feelings and thoughts about—and conclusions from—the story, and they give them a sense of having made a personal contribution by sharing them with the blogger. At the same time, this personal contribution enhances the communal effort, and each individual comment illustrates the awareness of thus giving weight to the community’s response at large.

As Graham Lampa states, bloggers turn their posts into rituals by periodically telling the public about their lives. Similarly, blog audiences, comparable to the newspaper readers Benedict Anderson discussed, turn their regular clicking through the latest posts into rituals. Paul Booth emphasizes the importance of instantaneous interaction of blog post and comment, and the proximity of post and comment in one and the same document. He adds: “[T]o integrate the comments into our notion of the blog is to allow a new reading of ritual communication as it establishes a community” (45). To him, the interaction, the reciprocity of post and feedback are signs of rituals because of the technological ability to perpetuate this interaction in one document. The previous examples, however, reveal that it is not only the act of posting and commenting that should be seen as a ritual but also the act of repeating a particular statement or emotional expression, adding to the sum of such statements or expressions. If blogging, as *Second Life*’s chief technology officer Cory Ondrejka once claimed, is the equivalent of standing on a hill and shouting into a bullhorn (cf. Rettberg 64-66), then ritual commenting is convening and taking turns in standing on a number of hills and shouting out a message which becomes louder and has a higher chance of being heard as more and more people repeat it and/or shout it out at the same time, and as more and more people can remember and tell stories about having once stood on that hill.

## Narrative Reverence: The Milblog Audience as a Fan Community

At this point, it is important to return to and discuss the example of contributing to ‘something bigger than oneself’ through participation in war in more detail. The phrase,

frequently used throughout numerous milblogs, functions mainly as a justification or a motivation for an individual's contribution to the war effort, be it by enlisting and volunteering for deployment in Iraq or Afghanistan or by contributing to campaigns under the motto 'Support Our Troops' on the home front. From the perspective of new media studies, the audience at *BLACKFIVE* and at the many cross-listed blogs and websites could be understood as a fan community which, in using this motto, contributes to 'something bigger' than themselves by actually making it bigger through their own fan activity and interaction on these blogs.

Focusing on fan-fiction writing and especially on the shaping of a story's narrative through the compilation of fan wikis, Paul Booth has coined the term 'narrativity' to denote the interaction within a fan community and its influence on the process of constructing that narrative. Booth states that fans become fans by forming a community, and he highlights that they "manifest their collective identity through writing fan fiction" (104). When an analysis of milblogs takes such a fandom studies perspective, and when the milblog audience is understood as a fan community, the value of community features and of reading comments as rituals becomes much more apparent.

"Taking Chance" is exemplary of a joint effort of author and audience that makes up the narrative of the story. The story of "Taking Chance," in this understanding, is not merely Strobl's post on *BLACKFIVE*. The story is the entire development of rapidly swelling numbers of comments and cross-listings as well as the eventual transgeneric expansion of the story into a book chapter and a film. It is here that "Taking Chance" constitutes the establishment of a community, creating and distributing a master narrative about the relationship of American civil society with its military and about coming to terms with the War on Terror. This master narrative does not only use the motto of 'contribution to something bigger than oneself,' identifying it with honor, commitment, and the (ultimate) personal sacrifice in war. The narrative is itself constructed through narrativity, as Booth developed this concept for his discussion of fan-fiction writing. The narrative of "Taking Chance" is created through the contributions of members of the blog community. By posting their comments, by repeating phrases and expressions of emotion, and by discussing concepts functioning as identity markers, the blog's audience contributes to the 'big picture' in individual steps. The audience takes control of the meaning of "Taking Chance," they help create its narrative structure, and they define its scope through distribution and through enabling its eventual transgeneric expansion.

Booth’s discussion of digital fandom concentrates on the interaction of fans to influence a narrative still under construction. His perspective and research interest scrutinize fan wikis and their influence on future episodes in serial authorship, i.e., how the activity of fans of a particular TV show influences the writing of new episodes. My narrative reading of milblogs discovers such author-‘fan’ interaction in the way milbloggers and their audience assure each other of their mutual interests, experiences, and sense of belonging. By sharing their experience on similar missions or on similar encounters at airports, the commenters, like the fans in Booth’s study, have contributed to the knowledge base of the story and have thus strengthened it (cf. 79-102). The ritualistic contribution of similar anecdotes, of similar declarations of gratitude and support likewise contribute to the knowledge base. Since the blog consists of both the post and the comments, its narrative is, indeed, constructed through the interaction of the audience with the blogger and with each other. But “Taking Chance” is an intriguing example for yet another aspect of narrativity: If not for the sheer number of comments and cross-links, the story of Chance Phelps would not have been so widely discussed. It is a matter of speculation but can nevertheless be safely assumed that, had the story not triggered such a massive audience reaction, it might not have been included in Burden’s blog collection in book form, and it would most likely not have attracted HBO to produce a film on this story. From this perspective of media reception and audience activity, the blog community has indeed contributed to something bigger than themselves; in fact, they have constructed something bigger.

## Conclusion

Milblogs have reached a wide audience since their first boom in the early 2000s. They have informed readers about events on the front lines, about everyday life in the camps and bases, about the culture and customs of the locals whose homeland has become the war zone. Milbloggers have used blogs as instant diaries, relating to the audience their feelings, memories, and conclusions about their personal war experience. Blogs are subject to the abilities and restrictions of online technology: A blogger can post about his/her experience almost immediately after the event, and, as Burden put it, this experience “fl[ies] unfiltered to anyone with an Internet connection and an interest” (4).<sup>12</sup> These technological opportunities have changed the cultural practice of talking

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12 The US military has begun to issue regulations to monitor the blogs’ activities and to channel the content that can be legally discussed on milblogs, culminating in Army Regulation 530-1 in 2007 (cf. Shachtman; Schippert). In that sense, ‘unfiltered’ must be taken with a grain of salt.

about war in public. They have changed the way soldiers relate their experience to others and, I argue, have changed the way in which they cope with their personal war experience.

“Taking Chance” is an example of the cultural work of military blogs in that it reveals the communal as well as the psychological aspects of blogging. This story about escorting a fallen Marine home to his family offers insights into long military traditions, into sociopolitical conflicts in US society, and into attempts to reconcile military and civil society. By showing the range of reactions of the blog audience, “Taking Chance” reveals how this audience creates, and nurtures, a sense of belonging. The interactions between audience and blogger and among the audience illustrate this sense. In their public debate on this blog, multiple overlapping communities assert themselves. Their interaction and mutual exchange are signs of active community building. The strong feedback to the bloggers’ input, however, does not only help build the blog community and construct its own narrative, it also works on a very personal level as a means of showing affection and mutual trust.

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