



Friended at the Front: Social Media in the American War Zone by Lisa Ellen Silvestri.

Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 2016. Pp. xv, 239. ISBN 978-0-7006-2136-1.

Review by Kelly McHugh, Florida Southern College (mchugh.kellyann@gmail.com).

In *Friended at the Front*, Lisa Ellen Silvestri (Gonzaga College), a specialist in communications studies, tackles a familiar topic—the use of social media by people in their twenties—but in an unfamiliar arena: the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. This subject has received scant scholarly attention. In the introduction, she asks

What challenges do military personnel face as they negotiate the institutional and cultural expectations for social media use? How do they communicate their deployment experiences, if at all, with social network members? What discourses do they draw from in order to sustain conversations across multiple publics and collective audiences? When, why, how, and to whom are particular utterances intelligible? (13)

To address these questions, Silvestri employs the concept of “technological agency,” which

neither reduces technologies to what humans designed them to do nor claims agency for the technology itself. To be sure, there are values built into technologies, but they do not determine use of these technologies. They do, however, constrain those uses.... Supposing that human behavior changes to suit new technologies' forms and processes, the very act of using Facebook generates patterns of activities that soon become second nature. (5)

The body of the book consists of four case-studies, each essentially a fascinating stand-alone essay. Chapter 1, “Incongruities across Social Media and Military Cultures,” concerns the regulation of social media usage by the Department of Defense. Three succeeding chapters—“From Posting Mail to Posting Status,” “Photos from the Field,” and “Marine Corps Video Memes”—discuss, respectively, posting on Facebook, creating Facebook photo albums, and creating and sharing internet “memes” or viral videos. (The chapter on Internet memes is the least effective in the volume. Apart from several humorous examples of viral videos created by active-duty Marines, it has little relevance to the broader themes of the book.) Silvestri finds that social media are fast evolving and democratic in nature and have profoundly affected the deployment experiences of US military personnel. Beyond that, they also shape the broader public's understanding of what it means for the United States to be “at war.”

Silvestri adopted a two-pronged approach to her research: first, she conducted three sets of on-base interviews with Marines following their deployments to Iraq or Afghanistan, particularly in the period 2008–12, when social media use became commonplace among military personnel. To supplement these interviews, she did “online fieldwork,” analyzing the Facebook pages of nine Marines.

The author acknowledges that her sample size is small, relative to the number of troops who served overseas. Nonetheless, she has found evidence that social media have transformed their experience of war, not always for the better.

The widespread use of personal computers, internet accessibility, and the proliferation of social network sites pose fundamental challenges to the maintenance of dualities between work and leisure. When communication takes place over non-physical networks, it complicates distinctions between work and

home as well as the social roles that go along with them. Applying these ideas to U.S. troops in a theater of war significantly raises the stakes for these types of dilemmas. (6)

Specifically, soldiers who used social media were “tethered to the home front” in an unparalleled way; in previous conflicts, communication between the war zone and home had been sporadic and one-sided. While all the Marines Silvestri interviewed appreciated their ability to connect in real-time with their loved ones, this also involved them in the everyday challenges faced by their families back home: worries over sick children, home repairs, or family disputes increased the daily stresses borne by the Marines. One who served in Afghanistan told Silvestri that his frequent Facebook use made him feel he had “one foot over there and one here” (45).

Silvestri explores this dynamic most fully in chapter 3, which contrasts present-day Marines’ communications with those of soldiers in past wars, who communicated mainly by handwritten letters. She finds that, in the era of social media, frequency of contact has replaced depth of contact (68). The messages the Marines posted to Facebook tended to be prosaic; the perceived obligation to post frequently left them describing the weather, food, and humorous occurrences. By contrast, letters written during past wars, which took weeks or months to reach their recipients, were often emotionally rich and focused only on significant events that had occurred on the home front.

Since social media not only facilitate communications among individuals, but also make them public, Silvestri considers the “audience” impact of the social media activity of military personnel. She notes that the Pentagon has attempted to regulate social media use by active duty personnel, fearing that a “nightmare reader” (enemy operative) might mine soldiers’ Facebook feeds to gain intelligence.

In her interviews, however, Silvestri found that the Marines were more concerned about hiding wartime images, not from the enemy, but from their loved ones. Many of them engaged in self-censorship when posting on Facebook to avoid alarming family and friends with images of violence, carnage, and danger. Thus their photos and messages often reported on day-to-day life on their bases, offering a sanitized “social media-friendly version of war—shiny happy people holding guns” (161).

Finally, the author considers how members of the military use social media to make sense of their combat experiences. The young Marines she encountered were struggling to grasp their role in a new kind of war, which looked nothing like past conflicts they knew of. In fact, she found, “Marines rarely used the term ‘war’ as a frame of reference for their deployments. Instead, they invoked discourses associated with everyday life and used ‘war’ to describe *specific moments* during their deployments” (163). In effect, the Marines were generating content that, while publically accessible, was meant for their fellow soldiers.

One subset of such self-restricted communication was “motivational photographs,” or “moto photos.” These were usually variants of the sort of photographs taken before the advent of social media, depicting soldiers in combat poses, in full military gear, often holding weapons. Interestingly, Silvestri finds that the moto photos, which comprised over half the photos she examined, mimicked the aesthetics of popular combat-based videogames like “Call of Duty.” She argues that the proliferation of these photos on Facebook, and the approving comments of their comrades, suggest that Marines in Afghanistan were seeking to “recreate the fiction of war in part for their social network audience and in part for themselves” (165).

The book is written for an academic audience; it includes a detailed survey of pertinent literature in communication studies as well as many source citations and much technical jargon. It provides a well executed preliminary examination of the intersection of media studies and military history and opens several avenues for further research. In a time when a historically small percentage of Americans serve in the armed forces, accounts and images of war shared on Facebook now shape most civilians’ conception of modern warfare.

Lisa Silvestri's engaging prose style (jargon aside) will make *Friendred at the Front* accessible to general readers and specialists curious about its subject. By studying twenty-first-century troops as technological agents, she forces her audience to consider the outsized role that social media play in both their lives and our own.