Lisa Ellen Silvestri. *Friended at the Front: Social Media in the American War Zone.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015. 288 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-2136-1.
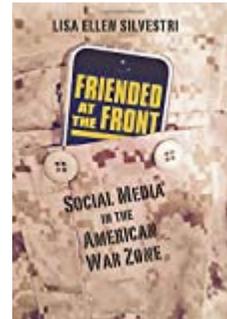
Reviewed by John Emery (University of California Irvine)

Lisa Ellen Silvestriâs *Friended at the Front* brings readers a fascinating look into the ways in which the Internet (especially social media) and troops at war mutually impact each other in contemporary conflict. Utilizing insights gained from in-person interviews with US Marines and a wide range of theoretical lenses, Silvestri offers a more holistic understanding of how soldiers frame their own narratives of war in the digital era. There has been much debate recently about the blurring of the war front and home front, with drone pilots who are âat warâ one minute and picking their kids up from soccer practice the next. However, these debates miss how social media has done something similar in what we consider the more "traditional battlefields" of Iraq and Afghanistan. Hence, Silvestri illustrates how social media (such as Facebook and YouTube) has been integral to the lives of soldiers and their families, and proffers compelling analyses to interpret the blurring of the lines between home front and war front. Rather than focusing on the technology itself, she is âmore interested in how people interact with those technologies. The goal is to understand how new modes of expression influence processes of human livingâ (p. 3).

The book is organized into six chapters that trace evolving ideas of what it means to be âat war,â with insights gained from both service members and their social networks. The introduction gives the reader the lay of the land, with accessible theoretical framing via media studies, communication theory, and social theory that readers from all fields of study will find easy to follow and enlightening. The first chapter introduces military culture and guidelines for social media engagement, setting the stage for how soldiers are expected to utilize social media and some problems that can arise from it. The second chapter focuses on social interactivity across fronts, the sense of constant connection and immediate contact afforded to soldiers by social media in Iraq and Afghanistan. Chapter 3 examines US Marinesâ digital photo album-making practices and how their social networks help soldiers in making meaning of their wartime deployments. In chapter 4 Silvestri considers how troops engage the values of the home front through the creation and dissemination of YouTube videos, suggesting that as the home-front attention to the Global War on Terrorism wanes, service members commandeer popular culture conversations to maintain relevance within the existing âattention economy.â Finally, in the conclusion, she takes a broader look at the narratives of war that troops tell about themselves and to each other, with a final optimistic take on the potential of social media and its impact on war in the digital age.

Before turning to some of the most powerful insights gained from the book I wish to briefly outline the bookâs methodology. Silvestri conducted a series of semi-structured, in-person interviews with US Marines who served in Iraq and Afghanistan on active bases (Pendleton, California and Okinawa, Japan). Building from her personal experience having a brother who served in Iraq, she utilizes a variety of mediums through which she interprets the complex interactions between the home front and war front mediated via social media. Each session was a private, forty-five-minute interview with junior Marines deployed between 2008 and 2012, as those years mark a critical flashpoint for the use of real-time social media software in Iraq and Afghanistan (p. 12). Additionally, she followed the Facebook pages of nine Marines over the course of their deployments, closely reading their wall posts, video posts, photo posts, and all the accompanying sidebar commentary. This drew her attention to the circulation patterns and processes of text production.

Many in academia today are focused solely on their âresearch questionâ that forces interviews and text into neat âcategoriesâ that may or may not be accurate representations of social reality. However, Silvestriâs method allows an openness to what might be discovered through her interactions with soldiers. She notes: âWhen I first began online observations, I didn't know what I was looking for; I simply took it all in. But as I began to transcribe my interviews from Okinawa and eventually Pendleton, some of the Facebook activities I was observing â¦ began to take on relevance. Throughout the interpretive process, interview conversations illuminated online observations and vice versa. Their interdependence is a genuine reflection of how my methodology unfoldedâ (p. 13). Ultimately, this interpretive process allows the possibility for the most accurate depiction of the mix of practices, representations, structures, rhetorics, and technologies that make up the complex interaction of the day-to-day lives of in combat and new social media technologies.

Many of us tend to have an image of warfare based on Hollywood movies or videogames. What is enlightening about this book is that soldiers also view themselves through similar lenses. Thus, they often describe their time spent in Iraq or Afghanistan as boring, or repetitive, work. Many soldiers active on social media donât post about some of the more rare but harsh realities of war, but seem almost as if they were on vacation, taking touristic type photos for friends and family back home. As one Marine put it, âWe didn't really talk about the war experience much. Just howâs the weather. Small talk, pretty much. I don't know. Itâs hard to explainâ (p. 70).

Here Silvestri captures the essence of the disjunction between Marines' expectations of what war âisâ and their day-to-day interactions with the home front, discussing the weather and posting vacation-like photos. On the one hand the interviews suggested that soldiers expect âwarâ to be like they see in the movies, with intense battles and moments of âsheer terror.â Thus, they often film their own footage of daily life almost morbidly hoping something âwar-likeâ will occur. Nevertheless, the image they present on social media can at times be more like that of vacationing in Afghanistan or Iraq, posting photos with friends, sights, and scenery. Soldiers for whom the war is an aspect of daily life, act and often feel as if they were not engaged in âreal war.â That is not to say that do not experience âreal warâ but it is often not how they imagined it to be, and when they share their experiences on Facebook, they rarely use the term âwar.â

Silvestri also theorizes about the impact that the prevalence of war language in everyday social media interactionsâfor example, the wars on drugs, poverty, Christmas, women, etc.–has on the public as a whole. Most importantly she argues that it creates a sense of war as mundane instead of extraordinary, that risks the loss of warâs distinction. Her goal is to keep war out of the ordinary and remind her readers that although the lines between the war front and the home front are increasingly blurred, war remains something distinctly extraordinary. Ultimately the narrative of war is changing and social media contributes to a feeling of routine in an already perpetual war, where âwar consists both of firefights and friend requestsâ (p. 17).

Soldiersâ personal photos from the field have become a feature of contemporary warfare. Several Marines said that they utilize the extra grenade pouch on their flack jackets to hold their digital cameras. In what is perhaps the most fascinating chapter of the book, Silvestri analyzes a number of photos posted by Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan, using a number of communication, media, and social theories to interpret their significance. While a majority of the photos were like those of any other Facebook userâa selfie, posing with friends, casually hanging out or goofing offânearly half were âmoto photos.â Moto photos are, according to one Marine sergeant, âany picture of you in gear looking badass,â where weapons are the central focus of the photo as opposed to the âbuddy poseâ (p. 98).

Silvestri found that the moto photos are not for civilian audiences, but for âthe personnel themselves to verify and authenticate their war experiencesâ (p. 104). If there is any doubt that their experiences in Iraq or Afghanistan are authentic, these images provide reassurance that what they are doing looks like âwarâ as our popular imaginings from films and videogames would have it. The photos themselves ended up being a kind of self-reflection for many, as one Marine recognized that his desire to take and post photos came from the idea âof knowing you are part of history and youâre trying to piece it together as you goâ (p. 108).

Beyond enabling sodiers to be in contact with friends and family back home, social media has allowed them to help in individual and collective meaning making between what war was for them and how they thought it should have been. Ultimately, this demonstrates the complexities of contemporary war. On the one hand many interviewees felt that mainstream news was an exaggerated version of their experiences, focusing on front-line conflict whereas much of deployment is the everyday experiences and âthe good stuffâ like building schools, which several Marines cited as their favorite deployment memories (p. 116). In the end, this book is a must-read for soldiers, scholars, policymakers, and citizens who would like to gain insight into the impact of social media in contemporary conflict and how the lines between the home front and the war front are becoming ever more blurred.

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