

Cyber Resistance

By [Dahr Jamail](#)

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If technology has transformed warfare into a spectacle of shock and awe, its contribution to the cause of dissent has been no less remarkable. It has enabled solidarities across borders and facilitated networks and forums dedicated to impartial communication of ground realities beyond the sanitized projection of mainstream news. True, technological advances have not brought an end to either occupation, but it has certainly helped alternative voices and views to be heard.

During the Vietnam War, over 100 underground newspapers, run by soldiers themselves, sprouted across the United States. The modern version of this has taken root within the Internet, largely in the form of blogs.

Many American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan have been confounded by the wall of censorship they confront, jointly constructed by the military and the corporate media. The Internet offered them a convenient and powerful channel through which to get their stories out to the public. Constrained by slow military mail service from Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention overt attempts by superiors to curtail their interaction with journalists, soldiers have long since taken to blogging, posting photographs and uploading videos online, all related to their experience of the occupations.

"Fight to Survive," one of the first soldier blogs from Iraq, had its origin before the bloggers were deployed to the country. The site's mission statement declares, "The E-4 Mafia was a group of soldiers deployed in Iraq between January of 2004 and March of 2005. The posts from this period are an expression of our raw emotions and thoughts while serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom II. Since being honorably discharged in the summer of 2005, we've continued to post additional journal entries, poetry, and reflections from our time served and our current lives as veterans as we continue our fight to survive."

Garett Reppenhagen, Jeff Englehart, Ben Schrader and Joe Hatcher were stationed in Germany, where they happened to attend a concert by a band called Bouncing Souls and befriended its members. Post-deployment they were desperate to process the grief, violence and frustration that they were experiencing in Iraq, so they started pouring their emotions into e-mails to the band members. The Bouncing Souls, impressed with the e-mails – which included powerful poetry – began posting them on their own website. In 2004, Hatcher created "[Fight to Survive](#)."

Englehart later told a reporter, "We were opposed to the war before we went. And we got together and said, 'You know what we should do? We should write about this shit.'"

Reppenhagen, the first active-duty soldier to have joined Iraq Veterans Against the War, was pulling a shift at Tower Guard in Fort Collins, Colorado, when Truthout phoned him. Tower

Guard is an action designed to spread awareness about the occupation of Iraq. Veterans pull together scaffolding, cover it with camouflage and, donning their desert gear, take shifts atop the tower – this one twelve feet high – to maintain a presence where people can ask them questions, and in response they can provide information.

For him, the motivation for the blog had come from having to participate in an occupation he didn't believe in. "We were already against the war before going, and didn't know why we were going, and it didn't look good. There was no resistance to speak of within the military. But I found a purpose with the writing. I didn't want to let my friends down there by not serving, and nobody knew what would happen if you refused to go out, because nobody had done it yet. So the blogging began. As a high-school dropout I wasn't a strong writer," he explains, but I had all these ideas I just couldn't stop, and writing them down was a huge release.... Having people read them was therapeutic. This then became my mission, to have people read about what we were doing. After a while, Joe Hatcher, whom we met in basic training, created the blog website. This was summer of 2004, and I'd never heard of a blog earlier. The idea caught on and sparked something, and as far as I know, ours was the only antiwar blog from soldiers in Iraq at the time. We used aliases; mine was "heretic" or "soldier X," Jeff Englehart was "hEkLe," Joe was "Joe Public." We used these because we were unsure of the consequences of revealing our identities."

Postings from Iraq on "Fight to Survive" ranged in content from asking people to sign petitions against stop-loss, to expressing disbelief at how persistent the military was in trying to get soldiers to renew their contracts, to posting graffiti and commenting on it. An entry posted in September 2004 by heretic titled "My Struggle For Reason" reads:

"Souls, Friends, and Conspirators,

"The temperature dropped to sixty degrees last night while I huddled in a ditch near Diyala Bridge. The breeze off the river crawled into my heart and the sudden chill reflects my current mood. I found out earlier that night that I had been extended an additional two months on top of my previous stretch. It now appears that I will be in the service until July, while my original date of release is supposed to be next month. All this, and my recent two-week taste of the civilian world on leave, is leaving me empty and detached. It is so much easier to live in slavery if you had willingly accepted your fate. I am not sure if my mental fortitude is prepared for a whole extra year in oppression. And, I still don't have a certain time when I will be finished with this war.

"Three soldiers in our unit have been hurt in the last four days and the true number of Army-wide casualties leaving Iraq is unknown. The figures are much higher than what is reported. We get awards and medals that are supposed to make us feel proud about our wicked assignment. We feel privileged when we are given the smallest perk. Like a dog that is beaten everyday and then thankfully adores it's owner when he skips a day of punishment. I have more trust with some of the Iraqi locals than my own command sometimes. I know that my higher chain of command hates me for my political opinions and my moral views.

"I am called a "faggot pink-o" or a "bleeding heart traitor." It doesn't take a liberal to realize the moral wrongs involved with this or any war. Why should I feel ashamed of caring about all of humanity, even the people that ignorantly hate me? Is wanting a better standard of living for all the world so negative? In a way, deeper than sexuality, I love my friends and brothers and for that I am labeled a deviant of some kind. Does everyone buy into this

Arnold ideal of fear that they are not strong enough, so they have to over-compensate and become an asshole? I believe that all weapons should be laid down [by] choice of the individual. It is the same fear I have of my bigot neighbor that causes Americans to support a war against a possible US threat. If we are all responsible enough to handle firearms, is it not sensible to allow countries like Iran and N. Korea nuclear weapons? If we think these countries are less responsible than the drunk-driving redneck or the crack-dealing gangster, I think we need to take a longer look at American society. Sure, a nuke can destroy the world, but an automatic weapon can kill my daughter and she is the world to me. I don't believe that taking away people's rights is the proper step to world peace. However, we overspend on national defense and cut education when we need to be more concerned about raising a generation of problem solvers, instead of mindless warriors.

"So I finally find the drive to get out and try to make a difference in the world, and I am stuck freezing in a Middle Eastern desert. What state will the earth be in if I ever escape this combat zone? What little changes I can make, I do through the networks I have built up with my close friends. The Bouncing Souls have given us soldiers a voice and forum to express the hardships and our feelings on the Iraq occupation. All my friends, some new and some old, listen and support our efforts and they have my deepest respect and thanks. I could not survive this in any sane manner without the backing of all of you. I cannot promise that I will have a positive effect on current issues that plague our planet, but I can promise I will never give up, if you never give up on me."

Another moving entry from August 22, 2005, titled "Finding Closure," posted by Jeff Englehardt (hEkLe) after exiting Iraq, reads in part:

"There is nothing that I feel can alleviate the guilt for being directly involved with our illegal and immoral occupation of Iraq. I ask myself from time to time, "Why was I so afraid to resist the order to go to war? Why didn't I object to the whole damned thing?" I have been told many times not to be ashamed for my service to this country, but I can't help a genuine intuition that this war is not designed to promote freedom and our beautiful American way of life, but instead only carried out to proliferate Western imperialism and corporate profits every time a bullet is fired. My guilt is synonymous with the sentiment that I was indeed on the wrong side of the wire."

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As the blogging continued, the audience expanded. Radio personality Randi Rhodes, who at the time brought Air America Radio its largest audience to date, began reading their dispatches on air.

As was to be expected, the military began to crack down on the writers. "It was not difficult for them to track what base and unit the writing was coming from and they were able to narrow it down to me," says Reppenhagen. "My sniper section leader walked into my room and asked if I was writing something stupid on the Internet. I admitted I was posting writings, but whether it was stupid depended on the readers' views, and he told me to report to the colonel who wanted to ask me questions about this shit I was writing."

All along, Reppenhagen felt he was leading a dual existence:

"I was living two lives, going outside the wire, but still writing on the blog, all the time looking over my shoulder. I was afraid of our e-mails being monitored, and there was a lot of

isolation.” He rarely crossed paths with the other members of the E-4 Mafia, and knew that he would have to deal with the colonel alone. From his perch on the tower, he recounted, “I did the whole thing, saluting him, doing the full pivot, and coming to at-ease, and he has a stack of everything we had written, and copies of personal e-mails I had written. He asked me if I had written it and I said yes. He told me I should stop writing, that I was going to be investigated by Military Intelligence and if found to have violated operational security, I would be tried for treason. I was scared.”

Undeterred, he kept blogging and was soon summoned by the colonel once again.

“I told him I had a right to continue. They pulled my computers, tried to limit my access, took me off sniper duty, and put me on guard duty of Iraqis on base. The last two months were lonely and difficult for me. I was afraid I would be court-martialed. In the end, it was determined that nothing I wrote had violated operational security and that I had committed no treason and, since there were no rules prohibiting blogging, I had broken no rules either. But I was continually hazed by my superiors as long as I was there.... They were constantly looking for ways to trap me. I was made to fill sandbags and do other menial jobs. However, I was finally awarded an honorable discharge in May 2005, and gained a lot of respect from most of my fellow soldiers. Many would give me the peace sign as they passed me by.”

Reppenhagen dove headlong into activism after being discharged. He took a job with Veterans for America, in Washington, DC, and volunteered at Walter Reed Army Medical Center. Coming full circle, Reppenhagen had one of his poems set to music by the Bouncing Souls. They called it “Letter from Iraq.”

In 2007, he moved to Green Mountain Falls, Colorado, and enrolled in a community college to study to become a history teacher.

He shares his plans: “I continue now to work at helping veterans get the mental and physical health care they deserve. And I want to teach history in high school.... One of my dreams is to teach on a Native American reservation. After coming back from Iraq, I traveled around a lot, and saw many reservations, and saw this grinding poverty there similar to what I saw in Iraq, and decided that that is where I can help the most.”

On being discharged, the other E-4 Mafia members also moved to Colorado: Schrader to Fort Collins, Hatcher to Cascade and Englehart to Denver. They continue blogging, alongside antiwar activism.

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Casey J. Porter, a specialist from Austin, Texas, served one year in Iraq and in fall 2008 was on his second deployment after having been stop-lossed. His contract ended January 21, 2008, but he was redeployed on March 9, although diagnosed with PTSD by a civilian doctor. As he says on a YouTube video, “I am making the best of it by making short films about what really goes on over here.”

A post from him on a blog called “Soldier Voices” reads: “Some of you might already know me through my films. I am a Stop-Lossed Soldier currently in Iraq.” There is a website for his work: <http://www.youtube.com/caseyjporter>.”

Porter’s films feature raw footage coupled with a compelling background score. Scenes include mortar attacks against bases, military personnel running for cover during mortar

attacks as explosions echo in the background, gun battles, destroyed Humvees and soldiers talking about their low morale. One film, "Area of Operations," reveals a new weapon of the Iraqi resistance, Lob-Bombs, which are created by cutting open an oxygen tank and packing it with ball bearings, screws and bolts as shrapnel before welding it back together and pressurizing. The film also shows a Lob-Bomb attack that killed two soldiers, which the Associated Press reported as having been caused by small-arms fire. Truthout spoke with Porter by telephone when he was at Forward Operating Base Rustamiyah. He said there were two versions in the military and corporate media reportage of the deaths: "One reported it as small-arms fire and the other as indirect fire. Indirect fire is obviously a very general term, so the Army can say, 'Oh, it is indirect fire, it's not an accurate weapon.' But when the public hears of indirect fire, they think some guy is shooting at you with a machine gun."

There is a clip in the film that has audio recordings from military radios after the attack. It presents a soldier saying, "The K.I.A. [killed in action], I can't tell you who they are, they're in pieces, break ..."

Later in the film, a soldier in Iraq says to the camera, "Would this country be the way it is right now had we done anything close to what we promised before we came over? The Humvees we drive, they are not doing the drive over here as protection ... not even the slightest. The MRAP [mine resistant, ambush protected] still won't stop an EFP [explosively formed penetrator]. But it's a big vehicle and makes a lot of noise and that's what the American people want, apparently." The camera goes on to show Humvees destroyed by roadside bombs, then returns to the soldier who says, "I won't be surprised if they turn this place into a duty station. I mean look at all the nations that we've liberated. Look at Germany, Korea. I'm pretty sure at one time somebody thought, 'Hey, we're only going to be here for a couple of months.'"

Another of Porter's films, "What War Looks Like," shows scenes of destroyed military hardware. Pictures of blown-up tanks and Humvees crushed by roadside bombs are seen flashing across the screen. Other scenes show burnt-out Bradley fighting vehicles atop transport trucks, decomposed bodies of fighters, and then the names and photos of "friends we lost," US soldiers killed in Iraq. After photos of a body being loaded for shipment back to the United States, the screen goes black as the text reads, "It's not politics, it is saving soldiers' lives, bring us home now."

Truthout asked Porter what had made him decide to make the films.

He said, "After coming back from my first tour, I was so against the war that I started speaking out and showing videos I'd made from footage I'd shot during my first deployment. Then when I got stop-lossed, I decided I'm not going to be another American who complains about the situation and then does nothing. Going AWOL wasn't a realistic option for me, so instead of being complacent about something I feel is wrong, I decided to make films to show people what they're not seeing on television, and to show people that I'm not the only soldier that feels this way. Along with very realistic combat footage, I showed real threats facing soldiers, some of the financial traps, and other issues they must deal with during deployment."

Porter talks of the morale in Iraq being poor and more soldiers than ever beginning to question the mission. However, he added, "One thing that disappoints me about American soldiers is the apathy, the 'what can you do?' mentality. But they are more or less speaking

their minds by not reenlisting though they are afraid of the consequences of actively speaking up. More of them are doing it, but still not as many as should. The Army seems like such a big giant, and the threat of, well, if you do this we're going to punish you, and we own you, and all this and that. Then this gets into soldiers' heads."

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Iraq war veteran and former Marine Adam Kokesh also maintains a blog, "[Revolutionary Patriot](#)" where he has written about being assaulted by undercover FBI agents in Washington, DC, about his thoughts on the Democratic and Republican National Conventions in 2008, and about dealing with PTSD.

Not a shy man, Kokesh did not hesitate to upload onto his blog a video of his speech during a march in DC, where he is seen exhorting a boisterous crowd, "The time is now. The threat is clear. The bands of tyranny are tightening around America. It is our duty to resist!"

Kokesh was part of a team of vets who met with Representative John Conyers in July 2008 to push Conyers to file Articles of Impeachment against George W. Bush. In a video of the meeting posted on his blog, Kokesh used his time at the microphone to tell Conyers, who was undecided about filing the articles:

"And I get the feeling that what you're doing and what the Democratic Party is doing is telling this country, as we are being bled dry by tyrants, that we're just going to be OK. That the only promises we get from Democrats are Band-Aids over these far deeper wounds that anyone is willing to admit to publicly. I hear one of the arguments against impeachment, that it would harm the Democrats in the upcoming elections. And I hope that you realize, because you didn't communicate this when I asked you the question, that there are real consequences to not impeaching that are far, far worse than not having Democrats in the Congress or Senate, or a Democrat in the White House. You said you've made thousands of decisions, many of them very respectable, many of them very courageous. But by your own admission, it seems that what is holding you back from this one is your own indecision. You said that I might be surprised by your plans. You haven't put forth any. And frankly, I'm not surprised."

Aside from blogging, testifying to representatives, leading marches and getting arrested, Kokesh has participated in Operation First Casualty (OFC), a tactic of street theater in which vets don their camouflage and take to the streets of US cities to carry out public patrols, realistic mock arrests, home raids and tower watches to raise awareness of the occupation. After an OFC action on March 19, 2007, the fourth anniversary of the invasion, he received an e-mail from the Marine Corps Mobilization Command that oversees the Individual Ready Reserve (IRR) to which Kokesh reported.

The e-mail accused him of violating the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) by wearing his uniform during a political event. "I was like, wait a second, I'm in the IRR, the UCMJ doesn't apply. This is bullshit." The scathing response that Kokesh sent back is posted on his blog. It concludes:

"I fail to see how reminding me of my 'obligations and responsibilities' helps you achieve either of these. It seems that while accomplishing our mission in Iraq, every corner we turn sends us further down the spiral, but there is still much that you can do to bring our fellow Marines home alive.

“So no, I am not replying to your email in order to acknowledge my understanding of my obligations and responsibilities, but rather to ask you to please, kindly, go fuck yourself.”

In the chain of events that followed, the military threatened to give him a less than honorable discharge, which would affect his education benefits, but so far the military has not followed through. His case was helped by appearing on several major media programs, including “Good Morning America.”

Kokesh thinks the future of GI resistance holds great possibility for social change. He told Truthout, “It’s kind of a battle for the hearts and minds of the troops between resistance and obedience. And if the military power structure keeps fucking up and putting people off, then resistance is going to start winning a lot more hearts and minds, you know, and we’re doing what we can to further that.” Yet he is realistic.

“The forces at play here are far greater than any organization, bigger even than the military itself. It’s social, it’s cultural ... and I think it is great in terms of what we can do to foster a broader civilian resistance, and develop a culture of questioning authority.... Whether the GI resistance movement is actually going to be enough to end the war, I don’t think you can consider it in those absolute terms. We’re building pressure. And there are a lot of forces maintaining pressure to keep the war going. If nothing else, we need to be a countervailing force to those and, who knows, maybe that’s going to stop the next war.”

Dahr Jamail, an independent journalist, is the author of “**The Will to Resist: Soldiers Who Refuse to Fight in Iraq and Afghanistan**,” (Haymarket Books, 2009), and “**Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches From an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq**,” (Haymarket Books, 2007). Jamail reported from occupied Iraq for nine months as well as from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Turkey over the last five years.

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