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Meryl Alper

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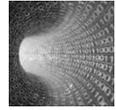
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# War on Instagram: Framing conflict photojournalism with mobile photography apps

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**Meryl Alper**

University of Southern California, USA

## Abstract

This paper examines recent acclaim for professional embedded photojournalists who visually document the experience of US soldiers in Afghanistan using the popular mobile photo application Hipstamatic. These photos have stirred controversy among fellow journalists and cultural critics regarding the use of photo filters in Hipstamatic and similar app Instagram, their contribution to the de-professionalization of photojournalism, and the depiction of war as stylishly vintage. The debates about Hipstamatic and Instagram in war photography open up a whole series of enduring questions about distinctions between photography and illustration, photography and photojournalism, professional and amateur, and reporting and editorializing. In consideration of the shifting nature of digital photography, photojournalism, and specifically war photojournalism, I argue that this discourse about the use of mobile apps overlooks another important ethical issue: the implications of non-soldiers mimicking the imagined hand of the modern smartphone-equipped US soldier, particularly in light of soldiers' own complex media-making practices.

## Keywords

Apps, embedded journalism, Hipstamatic, Instagram, mobile communication, photography, photojournalism, smartphone, war

On November 22, 2010, a square grid of four photographs taken by acclaimed *New York Times* (*NYT*) staff photographer Damon Winter appeared on the front page of the main section of the *NYT* as part of a set entitled “A Grunt’s Life.” The photos accompanied a

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## Corresponding author:

Meryl Alper, Department of Communication, Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, University of Southern California, 3502 Watt Way, Los Angeles, CA 90089, USA.

Email: malper@usc.edu

feature story documenting the yearlong deployment in northern Afghanistan of the women and men of the First Battalion, 87th Infantry Regiment of the US Army, among whom Winter lived for six days. The caption states that the green-tinted, dark-edged photos depict “the sweaty, unglamorous everything else of being in the infantry” (Dao, 2010).

Winter’s photos are stylistically as well as topically distinct from the majority of mainstream media coverage from this most recent war in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> One features a blurry close up of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich being made from military MREs (“meals ready to eat”), another a line of washed socks drying on a rock after falling into an irrigation canal polluted with human waste. “At the heart of all of these photos,” describes Winter (2011a: para. 2) in a statement to the Poynter Institute, “is a moment, or a detail, or an expression that tells the story of these soldiers’ day-to-day lives while on a combat mission.” In recognition of his *NYT* photoset, Winter won third place in the “Feature Picture Story - Newspaper” category of the prestigious Pictures of the Year International contest (POYi, 2011).

Winter shot “A Grunt’s Life” while “embedded” within the First Battalion. Introduced by the British military in the 1982 Falkland War, embedded journalism was extensively developed at the turn of the 21st century during the US-led Operations “Enduring Freedom” in Afghanistan and “Iraqi Freedom” in Iraq. In a partnership between the mainstream media and the military, embedded journalists are granted access to and physical protection by combat units in exchange for signing a contract specifying what journalists can and cannot document. Whereas photojournalists were largely removed from the action in the first Gulf War (Operation “Desert Storm”), the US Department of Defense offered the embedded system to the American media in Afghanistan and Iraq with promises of candidness and spontaneity.

Embedded journalism is a highly controversial practice among both the photojournalist community and academic circles. Many journalists initially reacted positively to the opportunities afforded by such unparalleled access (Tumber and Webster, 2006). Other reporters and scholars expressed concern over potentially skewed coverage of individual coalition soldiers (e.g., Aday et al., 2005; Pfau et al., 2004). In addition to an overemphasis of the “human face” of the US war effort, others contend that embedding dramatizes events and obscures the broader context of war (Liebes and Kampf, 2009). Writes Kennedy on embedded photojournalism, “It promises ‘real time’ and transparent imagery of life on the front lines of the war, but restricts the visual coverage to comply with ‘security’ requirements and produces an American-centered vision of the conflict” (2008: 285).

Critical acclaim for Winter’s embedded journalism work has been highly contested, exposing fractures within the photojournalistic community over the past, present, and future of photographic expression. However, the debate among prominent photojournalists does not actually stem from Winter’s embedding. Rather, his challengers are primarily concerned with the fact that Winter shot his award-winning photos on an iPhone, employing the popular mobile device application (or “app”) Hipstamatic, owned by parent company Synthetic Corp.

Optimized for use on Apple’s iPhone, Hipstamatic produces a square image with a “hip” or retro feel mimicking the look of photos produced by the Kodak Instamatic, a

point-and-shoot toy camera that was commercially successful and eagerly adopted by amateur photographers in the 1960s (Chalfin, 1987). The app allows users to choose among digitally simulated film stocks, lenses, and flashes prior to taking a photo. Hipstamatic (whose tagline reads, “Digital photography never looked so analog”) launched in 2009 with a price tag of US\$1.99. Hipstamatic was the photo app de rigueur by early 2011, following an influx of positive press from Winter’s POYi award as well as Apple’s awarding Hipstamatic its App of the Year award for 2010. As of March 2012, the app’s user base had peaked at 4 million (Carr, 2012).

Despite early success, Hipstamatic has struggled of late to keep pace with Instagram, a free photo taking and sharing app for iPhone and Android devices. Instagram allows users to take a filtered photo through the app (or filter a photo already stored on their device) and share it with their social network on Instagram and post directly to Facebook.<sup>2</sup> The latter acquired Instagram in April 2012 for approximately US\$1 billion. According to the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project, 27% of all US internet users aged 18–29 years use Instagram, the same percentage as on Twitter (Rainie et al., 2012). In March 2012, Hipstamatic announced a partnership with Instagram, allowing photos taken with Hipstamatic to be directly shared on Instagram’s social network.

Not only is there convergence between Hipstamatic and Instagram, but there are also considerable profitable overlaps between these “amateur” mobile photo apps and “professional” photojournalism. Getty Images and the Associated Press, two major providers of editorial photos, currently sell exclusive professional photographer’s Instagram photos of high-profile fashion and sports events (Reinsberg, 2012). Prominent photographer Benjamin Lowy’s photo of Hurricane Sandy recently appeared on the cover of *Time* (2012), and his photos taken on assignment in Libya were featured in the *NYT Magazine*, both taken on Lowy’s iPhone with Hipstamatic.

This paper focuses on the technical, aesthetic, and ethical dilemmas that mobile app photography provokes about digital photojournalism. Winter and Lowy’s Hipstamatic photos from the conflict zone have ignited an on-going war of words among fellow professional photojournalists on blogs and through Twitter.<sup>3</sup> Since 2011, the “purists” Lowy mentions have argued that his and Winter’s photos transgress a myriad of standards that they believe ought to be upheld across professional photography, photojournalism, and specifically conflict photojournalism. Others fervently defend iPhone war photography as innovative and responsive to the quickly changing nature of armed conflict, photography, and journalism.

In the following sections, I begin to map how the “war on Instagram” is being waged within the field of professional conflict photojournalism, first sketching a case study of how visual information, historically and at the present moment, continually blurs the lines between photograph and illustration, professional and amateur, and reporting and editorializing.

## Photography and illustration

As of late 2012, Synthetic Corp. was expected to launch a downloadable pack of Hipstamatic lenses and films dedicated to Lowy to raise funds for its new Hipstamatic Foundation for Photojournalism. Writes the *British Journal of Photography* (*BJP*)

(Laurent, 2012: para. 16): “Lowy’s idea was to build a relationship [with Hipstamatic] that would develop into the production of a digital pack that would help assuage some of the negative feelings the app has created. ‘There’s a lot of bad feeling from certain purists in the photojournalism world who say Hipstamatic is not ethical and not representative of actual events,’ said Lowy. ‘I wanted to create a look that didn’t have such variables and led to questions on the ethical implications of such photography.’”

In the same interview with the *BJP* he describes how the “straightforward look and feel” of the new lightly bluish-green digital lenses and films that he is developing with Hipstamatic are designed explicitly for photojournalism. Lowy (as cited in Laurent, 2012: para. 18) notes that he and the Hipstamatic app developers “went through a few of my images, and other photographers’ images, and basically tried to tone it down.” Lowy’s concession to his critics – “toning down” the illustrative style of the very Hipstamatic photo filters that won him acclaim – touches upon an endless discussion about understanding all photography as a manipulated interaction between style and substance, and a timeless debate over the ethics of combining photojournalism with aesthetics.

“Seeing” and “knowing” the truth are inexorably linked in both print journalism and photojournalism. Gross et al. (1991: 4) note, “The mission of journalists to serve the public’s ‘right to know’ is generally interpreted as also serving their ‘right to see’ the actors and the events deemed to be newsworthy.” In the 19th century, for example, it was common to mix photographic and journalistic metaphors, referring to print news as a “daguerreotype” of life. It was during this time that journalistic imagery began to transition from romanticized drawings and cartoons of witnessed events to more relatively realist “eyewitness” photography (Carlebach, 1992). In photojournalism, distinctions between photography and photographic illustration are bound up with ontological claims to truth. Whether photographs construct reality or capture reality has been famously deliberated by the likes of Bazin (1960 [1958]), Benjamin (1969 [1936]), and Barthes (1981).

How much and what kind of manipulation is acceptable in a photograph shifts dramatically at various moments in the history of chemical and digital photography (Ades, 1976; Mitchell, 1994). Accusations of image manipulation in war photography are not new (Griffin, 1999; Lester, 1991), and Hipstamatic conflict photojournalism is only the most recent example. Consider the graphic power of Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner’s influential photographs from the American Civil War. Brady and Gardner made visible carnage that was previously hidden from civilian view, but to do so they purposefully rearranged corpses on the battlefield for heightened impact. Journalism (including print, broadcast, and web) tends to turn toward the visual in times of crisis as a response to public’s need for truth-value, more so than in non-crisis times (Zelizer, 2004). The aestheticization of war and the manipulation of conflict images, in media production and post-production, has historically both illuminated and obscured social and political realities (Carruthers, 2011; Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010).

While digital photography creates many artistic opportunities, various contextual constraints bind photojournalistic aesthetic choices in a modern war zone. For example, Winter (2011a: para. 9) writes of the Hipstamatic photo filters he used in “A Grunt’s Life”:

If I had had the choice at the time, I would have used a program that applied less of an effect than what I used, but I was using it for the first time and this was all that I had available to me.

Winter further states that he would have downloaded one of Hipstamatic's more "subtle" plug-ins but he did not have an internet connection during his brief stint in Afghanistan. Distinctions between photography and illustration are tied not only the content of an image, but the circumstances surrounding the image's creation.

In recent decades, scholars such as Luc Boltanski (1999) have argued that the aestheticization of what we see in the media emotionally and morally insulates viewers from the suffering of others. Embedded war journalism, some argue, contributes an additional degree of ideological manipulation (Butler, 2005; Sontag, 2003). The use of Hipstamatic presents particular ways of "picturing" the news that critics of Winter and Lowy argue fully crosses a threshold into distorting truth beyond what is "acceptable" in contemporary digital photojournalism.

This "app-doctored" (Stern, 2012) misrepresentation of reality is so pronounced according to photojournalist Chip Litherland (2011: para. 3), another former POYi award winner, that he writes of Winter's work, "It's now no longer photojournalism, but photography." Ostensibly, Winter's spread was held to editorial policies regarding photo manipulation. States Michele McNally, Assistant Managing Editor for Photography for the *NYT*, "We have a very definitive policy regarding manipulation. For news pictures it is unacceptable. Our ethics guidelines make this very clear. For feature sections we sometimes combine photography with illustration. They are clearly labeled as illustration" (2006: Photo Manipulation section, para. 1). Winter's news pictures were not labeled as illustration by the *NYT*, and also passed the guidelines set by the POYi (2010): "Digital manipulation, manufactured photo illustrations, double exposures, added masks, borders, backgrounds, text, or other artistic effects are not allowed."

It is important to note at this time the ways in which images are produced through Hipstamatic and Instagram in order to evaluate the claims of manipulation and photo illustration laid against Lowy and Winter. Part of the debate stems from at what point "post-production" techniques are employed in the process of producing photos using either Hipstamatic or Instagram. The digital Hipstamatic app simulates an analog Polaroid camera in that one has to wait a few seconds for the picture to "develop" and appear on screen. While there is no "unfiltered" version of Hipstamatic photos saved on an iPhone, Instagram does allow for adding effects after taking an "unfiltered" photo, taking a photo while toggling through various possible filters in the viewfinder screen, and saving both the "original" and "modified" version in the camera's photo library.<sup>4</sup>

Technically, Winter and Lowy applied effects to their Hipstamatic photos *during* production and not *after* production, and so are akin to shooting with a night vision camera or black and white film. Notes Winter (2011a), "I don't see how it is so terribly different from choosing a camera or film or process that has a unique but consistent and predictable outcome." Hipstamatic photo effects may even be more blatantly identifiable than the work of photo editors who go to great lengths to mask the construction of a photo's visual style.<sup>5</sup> Lowy contends that his use of "minimalist" Hipstamatic effects is actually a reaction to egregious Photoshopping: "I know what the lens is, and I know what the

film is, and I take a picture, and the picture that I get out, that's what I use" (quoted in Estrin, 2012).

As opposed to blurring or dodging flaws away, Hipstamatic and Instagram evoke pseudo-photographic flaws, scratches, and smudges. These hypermediated imperfections do not appear at random, but rather are algorithmic; they produce a heightened awareness of their own production within the digital age of information (Bolter and Grusin, 1999; Lister, 2007, 2008). The aesthetics of Hipstamatic photos are not reducible to an interaction between the photographer, the film, and the lens. The images are not only the product of a machine, but also the product of that machine's computer programmers. In an article on *CNN.com*, news photographer Nick Stern (2012: para. 12) critiques Hipstamatic and Instagram photojournalism, noting:

It's not the photographer who has communicated the emotion into the images. It's not the pain, the suffering or the horror that is showing through. It's the work of an app designer in Palo Alto who decided that a nice shallow focus and dark faded border would bring out the best in the image.

At issue is whether one considers a Hipstamatic photo to be the "original" version of a photo, or if one believes an "original" exists at all, or exists only in relation to other versions of that photo. Writes Stern of Hipstamatic and Instagram photos, "The image never existed in any other place than the eye of the app developer" (para. 14).

Winter and Lowy view the conflux of photojournalism and aesthetics as unavoidable. Writes Winter, "We are being naïve if we think aesthetics do not play an important role in the way we as photojournalists tell a story. We are not walking photocopiers. We are storytellers." (Winter, 2011a), drawing distinctions between human and mechanical production. Regarding the role of aesthetics in photojournalism, Lowy (as quoted in Horaczek, 2011: para. 16) states:

At the end of the day, our responsibility as photojournalists is to efficiently connect with our audience and communicate an idea. If you can do that by creating a new aesthetic that provokes people to take the proverbial step forward to consume the image, then your job is successful.

Winter and Lowy's visions of the Hipstamatic photojournalist is reminiscent of the preface to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*: "To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim" (cited in Gaines, 1991: 44). While Winter and Lowy argue for a nuanced perspective on visual manipulation in regards to distinctions between photography and illustration, they simultaneously present less complicated takes on ideological manipulation and the aestheticization of war.

## Reporting and editorializing

A related, but slightly different debate from the role of Hipstamatic in "illustrating" images of war is the ways in which Hipstamatic, by virtue of looking "hip" and "nostalgic" according to modern aesthetic standards, inherently editorializes reportage already filtered by the US military. While the *NYT* online caption for Winter's photos describes

the images (such as that of a soldier napping using a cardboard MRE box as an eye mask) as “unglamorous,” there are critics who claim by virtue of Hipstamatic’s style that all photos, regardless of subject, even war, are rendered glamorously “faux-vintage.” Writes Jurgenson (2011: para. 12) of Hipstamatic depictions of modern warfare:

The simulated imperfections appear more real, dramatically gritty and borrow the cachet of war photos taken decades ago. We are reminded, often unconsciously, of those great images of wars long since passed; a time when fighting made more sense (even if this clarity is only the illusionary byproduct of hindsight).

Perhaps this perspective though too closely aligns faux-vintage war photography with the past. I would argue that there is an important distinction between “looking vintage” and “looking purposefully faux-vintage,” a distinction hinging on the articulation of irony. Hipstamatic photos look like vintage Kodak snapshots, but have recognizable conventions (e.g., color combinations, special borders) that mark them as produced in the present. The vintage style of Hipstamatic photos, as I have argued earlier, cannot be separated from the social, cultural, and technological factors shaping image consumption, creation, and dissemination through these apps. Nor should Kodak be over romanticized either, as West (2000: 1) writes in her analysis of early Kodak marketing at the turn of the 20th century:

Kodak taught amateur photographers to apprehend their experiences and memories as objects of nostalgia, for the easy availability of snapshots allowed people for the first time in history to arrange their lives in such a way that painful or unpleasant aspects were systematically erased.

When looking at a photo taken by Instagram, one is not only looking at a version of the past, but present patterns of networked participation as well. Those who use Instagram or Hipstamatic are not necessarily trying to make new pictures look like old ones, but trying to make their images look more shareable and interesting, particularly considering the dullness and graininess in the iPhone’s image-making functionality.

Another component of Jurgenson’s argument is that the poetics of photo apps inherently numb Americans from the blunt impact of graphic and violent imagery: that *aestheticizing* war leads to *anesthetizing* war, an argument also advanced by Sontag (2003). For example, commenting on the sale of Instagram to Facebook in *Business Week* (2012), Harry Bernstein, partner of digital agency The 88 remarked, “Life looks better on Instagram and I hope that doesn’t change.” What place, then, would disturbing and iconic images of war have among comparatively banal Hipstamatic and Instagram content? Consider Nick Ut’s photograph of a naked young Vietnamese girl fleeing a napalmed village, the thousands of photos of atrocities committed at Abu Ghraib, or Ken Jarecke’s chilling photo of a charred Iraqi soldier during the first Gulf War – each simulated on digital Polaroid paper in between photos of cocktails and kittens on an Instagram feed.<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard, in his provocative *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995 [1991]), argues that the simulacra of modern mediated warfare renders the reality of conflict invisible. Hipstamatic, scholars like Jurgenson argue, makes an already unknowable war even more unknowable.

Hipstamatic and Instagram also hypermediate symbols of the media. For example, Associated Press embedded photographer David Guttenfelder (2010a) also documents the experiences of US soldiers and fellow journalists in Afghanistan using Hipstamatic. The caption of one photo from a set of his reads, "A sign outside a media tent inside Camp Leatherneck in Afghanistan's Helmand province." The sign – a scrap of wood annotated with blue ballpoint pen drawings – symbolizes "media" through traditional iconography of a camera, a video camera, and a microphone. Absent are a mobile phone, computer, and other tools of the modern mediated war. Guttenfelder's photo is both a mediated frame and a framing of media.

Butler (2005: 823) writes that embedded reporting mandates that reporters not affix a critical gaze on their own embedding. She writes, "the photograph, in framing reality, is already interpreting what will count within the frame; this act of delimitation is surely interpretive, as are the effects of angle, focus, and light." I argue that the interaction between Hipstamatic effects and the interpretive frame make certain graphic images incongruous with the norms of Hipstamatic, and thus consciously censored from Hipstamatic pictures taken by embedded photojournalists.

## Professional and amateur

In addition to the ways that Hipstamatic conflict photojournalism illuminates the gray areas between photography and illustration, photography and photojournalism, and news reporting and editorializing, the subject also exposes tensions between "fourth estate" professional photojournalism and "fifth estate" citizen photojournalism. To put it bluntly, photojournalist Stern (2012: para. 2) contends, "With an app typically costing no more than \$1.99, everyone is becoming a news photographer." Anxiety derives from the fear that not only does Instagram make photos look better, but it also makes *anyone's* photos look better, even potentially better than the photojournalists who have resisted the transition from traditional film stock photography to digital photography altogether. While Stern spent years honing his skills, learning difficult techniques, and investing personal funds into buying the latest equipment, mobile phone app photojournalists do not have to work as hard, as he argues, "The app photographer merely has to click a software button and 10 seconds later is rewarded with a masterpiece" (para. 6).

Winter argues that critics such as Stern overemphasize basic access to photo apps, and that the trained mind, hand, and eye of the photographer are always present in the production of "worthy" Hipstamatic photos. "If people think that this is a magic tool that makes every image great, they are wrong," writes Winter (2011b: para. 14). "Of hundreds and hundreds of images taken with the phone over the course of those six days in Nahr-i-Sufi, only a handful were worth reproducing." Photojournalists may be holding onto certain tools as a way of separating out the professionals from the amateur or "citizen" photojournalists who increasingly threaten their status and livelihood, but Winter argues that pros such as Stern have little to worry about.

If anything, Hipstamatic may potentially be reinforcing hierarchies of professional photography. To respond to Stern's statement above, is everyone really becoming a news photographer, or are privileged and protected journalists reappropriating mass culture for personal gain? Low cost, high quality, and compact camera phones are certainly enabling

unprecedented global participation in conflict photojournalism. Deterministic descriptions of how new media and technologies can promote journalistic freedom requires careful examination though. Smartphone photography is becoming increasingly riskier for amateurs, and paradoxically, potentially more professionally and financially rewarding for embedded photographers. Hipstamatic photos could get an amateur photographer killed in Afghanistan, or it could lead a professional embedded photojournalist to the highest international award in photography. A photojournalist can easily be a Hipstamatic user, but according to both Stern and Winter's logic, it is much more difficult for a regular Hipstamatic user to be a photojournalist.

There are certain affordances of the iPhone that make it particularly useful for the embedded photojournalist. Hand (2012: 140) writes, "[T]he rise of digital photography is inseparable from the practices and expectations of contemporary photojournalism, in terms of the ethics of malleability and the material dimensions of the camera." Compared to a larger, more delicate traditional camera, a smartphone has myriad benefits on the front lines: smaller size, lighter weight, less additional equipment, easier battery charging, rugged, traps less dust, and more efficient workflow when pushing images to a site such as Tumblr.

It is also not as if photographers such as Lowy and Winter are abandoning traditional photography altogether. Lowy also took 35-millimeter photos on assignment for the *NYT* in addition to Hipstamatic photos. Shooting thumbnail images on a phone first as a sort of practice sketch can also inform the more formal documentation through a traditional camera. "Camera" has always connoted something different depending on the era – from bulky devices requiring long exposure times, to quick and lightweight cameras nested within other devices whose primary purpose might be texting (smartphones) or playing video games (the camera-enabled Nintendo DS). "As news images moved across technologies—including film, television, and radio," writes Zelizer (2006: 15) "—they took on attributes of the technology at hand." The Helga or Leica is not being displaced by the smartphone, but shifted in terms of their function and status within a "convergence culture" (Jenkins, 2006). The forced choice between traditional cameras and smartphone cameras sets up a false binary.

## Re-framing the picture

The discussion regarding Hipstamatic and Instagram in war photography opens up a remarkable number of debates among photographers and scholars. In consideration of the shifting nature of digital photography, photojournalism, and specifically war photojournalism, I argue that these discourses about the use of mobile apps overlook a key ethical issue: the implications of non-soldiers mimicking the imagined hand of the modern smartphone-equipped US soldier, particularly in light of complex relationships between soldiers' own media-making practices and the state's press apparatus (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009; Kennedy, 2009).

"To learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter," writes Butler (2005: 826) of embedded journalism. "And if there is a critical role for visual culture during times of war, it is to thematize the forcible frame agreeably and eagerly adopted by journalists and photographers who understand themselves aligned with the

war effort.” While the professional and critical discourse about embedded Hipstamatic conflict photojournalism does not raise the question about the ethics of associating soldier-made media with state media, being critical of these photos in this manner is a refusal to just see the interpretation of war as constrained by the state and embedded photographers’ relationship to the state.

Not only is the relationship between journalist and audience being constantly renegotiated in an era of digital war reporting (Matheson and Allen, 2009), but so too is the relationship between embedded journalist and soldier. Embedding is supposed to mitigate the risk of journalists coming under the line of fire, but there are consequences to such proximal connections. Writes Kennedy (2008: 284–285), “The close relations with American soldiers not only restricts movement and vision, it also creates a cultural pressure on the embedded journalists not to report on events that reflect negatively on the unit they are traveling with.” Embedded journalism tends to produce more stories on soldiers than on the people living outside of the US military bubble (Aday et al., 2005; Haigh et al., 2006). Many embedded journalists struggle to work outside of the inherently ideological slant of their intense focus on soldiers’ daily lives.

This skewed coverage is compounded by claims of producing mobile app photographs with a “soldiers’ slant” on events. Winter’s profile of “A Grunt’s Life” presents a highly circumscribed motif, not only due to its sole focus on American military personnel, but in its particular ideological construction of US soldiers’ own media practices. On the inspiration for “A Grunt’s Life,” Winter (2011a: para. 10) writes:

The soldiers often take pictures of each other with their phones and that was the hope of this essay: to have a set of photos that could almost look like the snapshots that the men take of each other but with a professional eye.

Other embedded photojournalists using smartphones have spoken of similar motivations to replicate the photo-taking soldier’s hand. Notes Guttenfelder (2010b):

Interestingly, I’ve noticed that Marines and soldiers are now shooting more photos and video themselves. [...] The photos are little bits of memory, keepsakes from their long deployments, and a way of communicating with people back home. So, in a way, I was trying to create those kinds of real-life, non-newsy snapshots that Marines might shoot for themselves.

Winter and Guttenfelder’s rationale falls into an anthropological trap, justifying the use of the iPhone and Hipstamatic as “naturalistic” because they empathize with how soldiers produce their own images of the war. The professional embedded photojournalist using Hipstamatic performs a sort of imagined autoethnography of soldiers’ own media-making practices. This performance is based on individual photographers’ highly time-bound conception of the kind of photos these soldiers would take if imbued with professional skills and competencies, as if that were the only distinction between the lived experiences of soldiers and embedded photojournalists. Embedded photojournalists are not observers, but rather, participant observers: their presence invariably alters the setting of their shots, regardless of the type of camera and the degree to which the device becomes silent and unnoticed.

The “imperfect” Hipstamatic photographs taken by embedded photojournalists are potentially misleading because they feel as though they might come from the “subjective” perspective of troops rather than the objective perspective of the embedded photojournalist. Adopting the perspective of soldiers might be appealing for photojournalists because soldier participation and visibility in the representation of war can often appear to be a “bottom up” alternative to “top down” political and military positioning (e.g., Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009; Smith and McDonald, 2011). This appeal to the vernacular in professional war media production is a reflection of what Turner (2010) calls the “demotic turn” in popular culture, or the increased visibility of “ordinary people” in media production without a necessarily more democratic public sphere.

One of the affordances of the iPhone is that it enables a level of intimacy, simulated or real, between the photojournalist and the soldier. “Spectators,” writes Woodward (2002: 11), “are indeed often unaware of the constructed nature, and thus the style, of images in the genres of documentary photography and photojournalism.” Without a high-powered zoom, smartphone photographers need to be physically close to their subjects to render fine detail, which is perhaps why Winter captured so many relatively mundane, everyday objects that make the unfamiliarity of war more comfortable and familiar for mass consumption. Notes Winter (as cited in Estrin, 2010: para. 4), “[T]he soldiers often take photos of each other with their phones, so they were more comfortable than if I had my regular camera.” The photographers’ intimacy with the object, the photographers’ intimacy with the subject, and the subjects’ own intimacy with the photographic tool all crowd the frame of these Hipstamatic shots. These embedded photographers not only identify with the troops they are following, but purportedly adopt the storytelling tools seemingly favored by those troops to reflect that reality to the outside world.

These photos, constructed around an image of the hypothetical soldier, do not account for the polyvocality of multiple soldier perspectives and voices, *speaking for* troops by *speaking through* their imagined mode of photography. What are the implications of professional embedded photojournalists adopting these popular tools and appropriating these visual styles “as if” any amateur photographer soldier could have taken them? For better and worse, amateur digital media produced by soldiers often has a complicated relationship with mainstream news coverage (e.g., war blogs, soldier-made music videos posted on YouTube). Writes Andén-Papadopoulos (2009: 17), “These personal, poignant and sometimes shockingly brutal video testimonies clearly diverge from, and subvert traditional forms and standards for war reporting.” For example, homemade video testimonials posted by US coalition soldiers in Iraq on YouTube present views that sometimes complement, and other times contradict, US foreign policy (Smith and McDonald, 2011).

Kennedy’s (2009: 819) analysis of US soldiers’ production, consumption, and dissemination of photography from Afghanistan and Iraq stands in sharp relief from Winter and Lowy’s rather quaint construction of the soldier as personal media maker. He writes:

The soldiers “running around with digital cameras” are the truly “embedded” photographers. This digital generation of soldiers exist in a new relationship to their experience of war; they are now potential witnesses and sources within the documentation of events, not just the

imaged actors—a blurring of roles that reflects the correlations of revolutions in military and media affairs.

Soldier photography means many things to many different soldiers: genres range from street photography, to touristic imagery, to pornography. Kennedy quotes soldiers referring to their own photos as an “online therapy session,” their own roles as a “unit’s unofficial photographer.” Winter and Lowy’s work smudges perhaps necessary distinctions between public photo “essay” and private photo “diary.” Their insistence that their photos are in some way representative of the photos the soldiers they shadow would take raises ethical issues new to this current representation of warfare via popular photography tools such as Hipstamatic and Instagram.

## Conclusion

The term “#nofilter” is a popular hashtag, or textual marker, in the lexicon of Instagram. It is an example of what Gershon (2010) describes as an “idiom of practice,” or a way for a group of people with some shared sense of identity to develop their own approach to using mediated communication in a manner distinct from others. Future research into Instagram photography should further explore the relationship between hashtags and photos circulated on the platform. For example, by typing “#nofilter” into the comments section of their own “Normal” Instagram photos before posting, users signify a claim to not have altered the image’s appearance by running it through any of Instagram’s artistic processing. Writes *The Atlantic*’s Garber (2012: para. 4) of “#nofilter”: “this is Instagram at its purest.”

Whether or not a photo has been processed with the sepia tinge of the Sutro filter, or the washed-out Walden, all photos taken through a mobile photo app such as Instagram or Hipstamatic are in some way “filtered.” Technically, even basic Instagram photos take the shape of a square, versus the automatic rectangular dimensions of an iPhone’s built-in camera. Ideologically, “#nofilter” serves a social and cultural purpose for those who employ it. The claim to clearly demarcate the real from the artificial says more perhaps about the person taking the photo than about the photo itself.

The debates about Hipstamatic and Instagram in war photography open up a whole series of enduring questions about distinctions between photography and illustration, professional and amateur, and reporting and editorializing. Damon Winter and Benjamin Lowy’s photos have stirred controversy among fellow journalists and cultural critics regarding the use of photo filters in Hipstamatic and similar app Instagram, their contribution to the de-professionalization of photojournalism, and the depiction of war as hip and retro cool. If we are to begin to understand the specific emergence of mobile phone photography apps as a new media of expression, and their application to embedded photojournalism, it is important to historically, technically, and aesthetically contextualize the current anxieties expressed by Winter and Lowy’s critics about digital photography and the style of information-oriented imagery.

In regards to Hipstamatic iPhone photography, a social determinist might say, “It’s not the tool you use, but how you use the tool.” A technologically determinist take might be, “It’s not how you use the tool, but the tool you use.” Reality of course is more of an

interaction between people and technology, and between photographers and photography. It is not just the tool a person uses, or how a person uses the tool, but in the case of “faux-soldier” photography, whom an audience imagines as the user of the tool.

The stylized images that embedded photojournalists log through Instagram or Hipstamatic are thus doubly filtered, re-rendered and re-articulated through that which is present or absent in the war imagery they produce and publish. A photo taken by an embedded photojournalist on the front page of the *NYT* is at its essence contractually censored. Winter and Lowy’s images of war are augmented too by a working conception of the meaning of US soldier-produced media.

While there are many possible debates, most important and least understood may be the ethical critique of professional photographers simulating the amateur soldier-photographer’s hand as the creator of the on-the-ground photo, documenting the ordinary experiences of soldiers under the extraordinary conditions of war. Hipstamatic photos of soldiers’ everyday lives, taken by professionals to look purposefully “amateurish,” are ethically questionable if we consider these photos to be taken by professionals to appear “as if” seen through a soldier’s eyes – or a soldier’s own iPhone. The embedded photojournalism world is not only under pressure to adjust to rapidly changing technological processes and practices, but is also struggling to come to terms with underlying social and technologically determinist assumptions about the relationship between photographers and soldiers.

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## Notes

1. I note “photos from this most recent war in Afghanistan” as there has been over a century of war in Afghanistan, conflicts that visiting Western photographers have chronicled throughout. Notable early work includes the photos documenting the Second Anglo-Afghan Wars (1878–1880) by Irish photographer John Burke (Khan, 2002).
2. On their blog, Twitter recently announced that Instagram photos would no longer be supported on the site. Instead, Twitter would be adding its own photo filtering options to all photos uploaded to Twitter (<http://blog.twitter.com/2012/12/twitter-photos-put-filter-on-it.html>).
3. A sampling of headlines include “Hipstamatic and the Death of Photojournalism,” “Hipstamatic Angst, Instagram Anxiety,” and “Is smartphone photojournalism the way forward?”
4. This visual modification is in addition to annotating the photo with text and emojis when shared on Instagram’s platform, or the common practice of posting an Instagram-filtered photo of a screen grab of another user’s Instagram photo (known as a “#regram”).
5. The same cannot be said of Instagram photos, as it is a common professional practice to import photos first into a mobile photo editing suite such as the app Camera+ before re-editing photos in Instagram.
6. One example of disturbing and iconic imagery re-interpreted through Instagram’s photo processing are the thousands of filtered screen grabs of the Twin Towers ablaze uploaded on September 12, 2012, and marked with the hashtag “#september11”.

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### Author biography

Meryl Alper is a PhD student in Communication at the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism at the University of Southern California. Her primary area of research is on understanding families' evolving relationships with old and new media and technologies from a historical and sociological perspective.