

Looking for Marshall McLuhan in Afghanistan



A 12-part [LRC](#) series, featuring text and iPhone Hipstamatic photography by [Rita Leistner](#)

FEB 02

INTRODUCTION - THE PROCESS

“All new technologies bring on the cultural blues, just as the old ones evoke phantom pain after they have disappeared.”

- Marshall McLuhan, *War and Peace in the Global Village*



January 20th, 2011 - en route from Dubai to Kabul - Hindu Kush Mountain Range from the plane. (photo: [Rita Leistner/basetrack.org](#))

iPROBE_THE EMBED

Last March, I arrived home from Afghanistan—after being embedded for three weeks as a photojournalist with the United States Marine Corps, 1st Battalion, 8th Marines (1-8), in the remote southern province of Helmand—with an iPhone full of Hipstamatic photographs and a bad case of the blues. For weeks after my return, walking down the streets of Toronto, I would burst into spontaneous tears of gratitude, I was so happy to be back in Canada. After ten years of foreign military intervention, Afghanistan is as dangerous and violent, as poor and oppressive, as chaotic and unruly, as it was since the American-led war began.



The author in a C-130 Hercules transport plane in her bulletproof gear on the two-hour flight from the American military airport in Kabul to Bastion Airfield in Helmand province, January 21th, 2011. (photo: Rita Leistner/basetrack.org)

I'd gone to Afghanistan to work for a social media experiment called Basetrack, an international collaboration of designers, writers, researchers and photographers. The Basetrack project used the new social media to bring the Marines closer to their people back home. It comprised a live website with daily posts of stories and images taken by iPhone cameras within the perimeters of a U.S. Marines Battalion on a seven-month deployment. There was also a Facebook Page where families back home could post comments. While my curiosity of how this new media technology would play out in Afghanistan was central to my decision to go, I did not know then how much it was going to shape my perspective of the military embed and the kinds of photographs I'd make.

**

Helmand province is located on the border with Pakistan. Around Musa Qala, where 1-8 operations were centred, it is mostly barren and stony desert highlands, sparsely populated with adobe villages, mosques and minarets. Every Friday, a market (of only men) bustled outside the gates of the main operations base. A four-hour convoy south brought us to the hamlet of Shir Ghazay. In my ten days there, I met only one woman—a midwife at the local clinic—and saw only a few others from a distance, before they deked out of view. There was no school, other than the one the Female Engagement Team attached to 1-8 tried to open, but its future seemed highly doubtful. One thing for sure was that even if the school survived, girls would not be allowed to attend. A few people owned motorbikes or rusty old cars. Electricity was a luxury. There was no running water. A handful of gas pumps serviced the region.

Against this pastoral, almost medieval backdrop, the contrast of the Marines marauding across the landscape, with their MRAPs (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) vehicles and M16s, their headgear and heavy-duty body armour, seemed surreal. "I feel like I'm on the set of a Star Wars movie," I said one day.



(left) Local Afghans leaving Patrol Base Talibjan, where they come to get medicine, or to sell local goods. (right) FET Team 12 Leader Sgt. Sheena Adam on patrol. (photo: Rita Leistner/basetrack.org)

The Battalion Commanders were already in a foul mood before I arrived. The Battalion had lost a lot of men—but that is not unique in front line units, and it didn't explain why they were so on edge. They certainly did not hide how unhappy they were to have us and our social media accoutrements, including our battery of iPhone cameras, in their midst. Still, they honoured the Basetrack embed, which they'd agreed to long before, and which was already in its sixth month of the Battalion's seven-month deployment—the longest continual embed by a media organization with a single military unit.

THE SOCIAL MEDIA

The reason for the Battalion Commanders' foul mood, I came to suspect, had to do with a general sense of powerlessness over the situation in Afghanistan, despite the Americans' obvious military and technological supremacy. Our project, which went further than anyone previously had in integrating military coverage with social media, was a symbol of this loss of control over technology, and Facebook became the scapegoat. The people back home did not always post things the Battalion Commanders wanted to see. When Facebook proved impossible to fully censor, the Commanding Officer and his XO (Executive Officer and second in command) asked that the Basetrack

Facebook group be shut down. The Basetrack team leader, Teru Kuwayama, a ten-year veteran of covering the war in Afghanistan, whose Knight Foundation–funded media initiative was always openly interactive with Marine families back home, was within reason to refuse. “Sure, we’ll just call Mark Zuckerberg and tell him Facebook is over,” we joked.

If the Basetrack site were in any way threatening the mission or the safety of the Marines, I would have understood. But it was absurd to say it was. The Facebook site was mostly wives and mothers sending words of encouragement to their boys. There was some criticism of the war. Yes. But we couldn’t ethically censor that (by omitting or deleting posts critical of the war). And certainly it was nothing one couldn’t read elsewhere all over the web—in fact these posts were mostly links to articles in other media. If anything, the Basetrack website, which was redacted (censored) by the XO during the embed period¹, was pro-military. The vast majority of the images, due to censorship requirements and the intention to provide comfort to their families, were straightforward, flattering portraits of the daily life of the Marines. Those of us who embedded had extensive experience on military embeds and front-line warfare; we had moreover faced the even greater dangers of unilateral (or unembedded) coverage of conflict zones. All of us had covered much tougher imagery over the years, and we were doing this, by and large, to give something back to the Marines and their families back home. See, for instance, the posts and the photographs on the basetrack.org site during the embed period (October 2010 to February 2011).

While the CO and XO scolded us for taking photographs of Marines out of uniform (which would look bad to people back home), we were being accused by other journalists of toeing the military line and creating propaganda. Given the number of Marines, soldiers and Afghan civilians getting their limbs and heads blown off in Afghanistan, the emphasis placed on how we represented their haircuts seemed absurd. Yet we complied.



After taking a photograph of Marines lifting weights with their shirts off, I asked them to put their shirts on for a second frame so we could post it on the website for families back home to see. (photo: Rita Leistner/basetrack.org)

Before long, families back home started getting “warnings” from their Marines that if their mothers, brothers, girlfriends, wives, etc., didn’t boycott the Basetrack Facebook page, there would be consequences for their boys on deployment. “You have to understand,” the XO told me, “that if wives back home got together over Facebook, the next thing you know, they’ll be going to bars and cheating on their husbands. Marriages could be ruined.” And besides, he said, “The CO’s wife doesn’t like Facebook.” I tried to explain to the CO that I wasn’t a big fan of Facebook myself—the internet, by competing with print media for advertising money and giving rise to a new force of citizen journalism had, after all, forced the closings of many newspapers and put a lot of journalists out of work; blogging and Facebook were all a part of that—but it was unstoppable, and the whole point of this experiment was to figure out how the military, and we, were going to operate in this new media world.

In the end, the Basetrack team embed was terminated just one month before the Battalion would be heading home.

In his probes on the telegraph (in the 1950s and ‘60s), Marshall McLuhan explained how instant messaging threatens any organization: “There is a collapse of delegated authority and a dissolution of the pyramid and management structures” (*Understanding Media*, p. 247). Obviously,

technologies are fine as long as they are in the hands of the right people. There is a Greek myth about the phonetic alphabet that McLuhan recounts in *Understanding Media*. It tells of how the advent of “the easier alphabet, and the light, cheap, transportable papyrus together effected the transfer of power from the priestly to the military class” (*Understanding Media*, p. 83). This is a dilemma that is much bigger than the Basetrack project. What happens when the citizenry, or worse, your enemies, get hold of the same technology?

It was amazing, really, that the Marines were allowed to use the internet at all. It’s supposed to be good for morale, but as it turns out, it might have the opposite effect. The military thought they could at least monitor what goes on over the internet, and they could shut it down at will. Mobile phones were another thing altogether and were not permitted, although the Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers, who did not have internet, actually had mobile phones that they could use to call home and for banking their military pay. One of the Marines on base in charge of military-sourced media, aka “Combat Camera Guy,” told me that he thought the military would be better off with no media access at all. He was right, of course. But the truth is, while the media gets a great deal of access to the military, embedding journalists is still the best way for the military to control media reporting. In Afghanistan, as in Iraq, embeds are by far the safest, most feasible way for journalists to cover the conflicts. Media outlets know this, and so they have to placate the military just enough to hold on to “good” embeds (i.e., front lines, not out-of-the-way outposts doing little more than handing out candy to children).

As we witnessed this unravelling of control over the internet and Facebook, it occurred to me that it might seem to the military that they were being betrayed by the very technologies that were meant to empower and protect them. Facebook was just one more technology that wasn’t doing as it was told.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

I had my Marshall McLuhan epiphany in Toronto on May 14th—two months after I got back from Afghanistan and almost one hundred years after McLuhan’s birth in Alberta, Canada, in 1911.

I’d gone to a talk on McLuhan as part of the Toronto CONTACT Photography Festival. To my surprise, a late addition to the speakers was Semiotician and Professor Emeritus of French and Comparative Literature Peter Nesselroth—my friend and teacher from my graduate school days in comparative literature at the University of Toronto. Listening to Peter, the synapses of my brain were

awakened with ideas, and suddenly—and like so many things in life that you don't recognize the reasons for until long after the fact—I understood that somehow Marshall McLuhan was the key to whatever had happened in Afghanistan between me, an iPhone camera and an app called Hipstamatic.

I realized that a big part of what had unsettled me about my experience in Afghanistan was working with the iPhone Hipstamatic app. We weren't the first journalists to do so, but it was still new enough that blogs filled up with opinions of how the technology would affect people's relationships to war through photography. A common criticism was that it rendered war nostalgic. And yet for professional photographers who had spent most of their lives working with film and printing their own photographs in darkrooms, there is nothing nostalgic about the Hipstamatic. On the contrary, its obvious and aggressive referencing of traditional photography served only to highlight the digitalness of the device and its distance from mechanical cameras and traditional wet darkrooms.

It also made me feel removed from the process of taking and making the photographs, and this contributed to my difficulty in coming to terms with the very experiences I'd photographed. Surrounded by all the dehumanizing technologies of war, I felt myself being erased as an artist by the very technology I was using.

McLuhan notes that “all wars have been fought by the latest technology available in any culture (*Understanding Media*, p. 339). Photographers do the same thing with new technologies, always upgrading to compete with each other. But because we are artists as well, as McLuhan also notes, we are supposed to exult “in the novelties of perception afforded by innovation (*War and Peace in the Global Village*, p. 12). Besides, 172 years of traditional photography doesn't seem to have done much to bring an end to war, so it made sense to me to try the new technology and the latest social media.

It wasn't a requirement of the Basetrack project to shoot with iPhones, but when I first saw the curious and often compelling images my colleagues were making, it was an easy decision to buy myself an iPhone and see what I would do with it.

One of McLuhan's key concepts is of Figure and Ground. It is a way of talking about how our perception shifts when we open our minds to the relationships between subjects and contexts, foregrounds and backgrounds, medium and content, hardware and software. In this formula, the iPhone is the figure, and the Hipstamatic app is the ground. In all of these relationships, epiphanies take

place when one is willing to experience both simultaneously, in what McLuhan describes as resonating intervals (one of his most useful metaphors). And so when I heard Peter Nesselroth talking about McLuhan, I was suddenly able to recognize the effect the Hipstamatic photographs had on me and, rather than hiding from their strangeness, I allowed myself to enter into the resonating intervals of meaning between digital and mechanical, virtual and tangible, that might be discovered inside them.

THE iPROBES

And so it was that bit by bit, I started to look at my images again and all I could see were artifacts and technology: armoured vehicles and body armour and weapons and radio towers; loudspeakers and improvised explosive devices; fuel dispensers and mobile phones; sandbags and HESCO barriers; the occasional flag. I realized that part of what had unsettled me so deeply was the conspicuous absence of humanity in it all. The Americans dehumanized the Afghans, the Afghans dehumanized women, and the technology dehumanized the Americans—it was infectious. That is the job of war: you have to dehumanize someone, after all, in order to kill or torture them with a clean conscience. McLuhan says, “all media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical” (*The Medium is the Massage*, p. 26). The extensions, all media and technologies, are also removed away from the human hive—like the robotic drones first developed by the Israelis for surveillance purposes.

Once you start looking for McLuhan, it’s impossible not to see traces of him everywhere. Everything becomes an artifact you can unpack and un-layer like a phyllo pastry.

What follows is a series of probes of images and artifacts stripped to the bones. They look at the digital captures of the iPhone Hipstamatic app in the context of a military embed and probe military technology, as well as the technology of the iPhone itself.

I’ve used the word iProbe, as a portmanteau of iPhone and Probe—Marshall McLuhan’s linguistic and semiological investigations into culture, technology and artifacts—after being encouraged by my friend and editor Diana Kuprel, who also gets credit for coining the term iProbe. A Probe looks at artifacts metaphorically, with the understanding that every object has the capacity to stand for something other than what is obvious or on the surface. It goes mining for meaning—something I was determined to find in my iPhone full of photographs as a way of making sense of and giving meaning to my

experience. And so the iProbes are both the result of my semiological investigations, and my therapy.

I have tried in previous work to show the human face of war. With the tools of Marshall McLuhan in hand, this is an attempt to do something different and see what can be revealed by examining the face of war through the extensions of man.

Notes

¹ After the embed, the Basetrack website continues as an open-source media-system, designed to offer a free publication platform for other independent reporting projects. This article refers only to the immediate embed period of which I was a part.

Works Cited

- Marshall McLuhan, with Quentin Fiore. *War and Peace in the Global Village*. Corte Madera, CA: Gingko Press, 1968.
- Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994.
- Marshall McLuhan, with Quentin Fiore. *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*. Toronto: Bantam Books, 1967.

Acknowledgement

The photographs in this series were produced as part of the [Basetrack project](#). Basetrack is supported by a 2010 Newschallenge grant from the [John S. and James L. Knight Foundation](#).