New media and the war in Afghanistan: The significance of blogging for the Swedish strategic narrative

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Abstract
The new media situation gives fuel to increased competition between narratives. In the sphere of security this poses challenges to government strategic narratives. Scholars, drawing on findings from the Anglo-Saxon sphere, suggest that the new media activism gives rise to counter-hegemonic narratives that thrive on and through social media sites. We argue that the emergence of counter-narratives in the sphere of security depends upon a few key dynamics that might vary with political context such as political culture, the size of the blogosphere, the debate in mainstream media and socialization processes within the military organization. Our case study of Swedish blogging about Sweden’s military contribution to the International Security Assistance Force mission in Afghanistan suggests that blogs are mainly used to sustain – and not to challenge – the governmental narrative. This invites us to question the significance of new media platforms as counter-hegemonic forces in communities beyond the Anglo-Saxon sphere.

Keywords
Afghanistan, blogs, counter-hegemonic narratives, International Security Assistance Force, social media, strategic narrative

Introduction
The construction of strategic narratives is vital to governments in the legitimization of military campaigns. These legitimizing practices are becoming increasingly complicated

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to manage as competing narratives emerge on social media sites such as Wiki leaks, blogs and Twitter. Studies of the Anglo-Saxon setting tend to highlight the power of counter-hegemonic narratives articulated via social media, yet research remains inconclusive and we therefore ask whether the new media situation generally serves to undermine governmental legitimizing practices. It cannot be assumed that contestations between narratives follow the Anglo-Saxon pattern. This article adds to this debate by providing empirical insights from a critical case study conducted beyond the Anglo-Saxon sphere, contrasting the Swedish governmental strategic narrative on Afghanistan with the content of blogs on the subject.

This article first scrutinizes previous research on the power of counter-hegemonic narratives articulated via social media. The Swedish governmental strategic narrative is subsequently presented. The empirical case study explores the blogosphere on Sweden’s military mission in Afghanistan in order to discern whether the new media setting mainly serves to undermine or strengthen the governmental narrative. We investigated two categories of blogs: officially sanctioned ones published on the Armed Forces’ home page who claim freedom of expression and are nominally free to raise counter-narratives, and independent ones who published regularly on the Swedish mission in Afghanistan and claimed to represent no one but themselves. This design enabled us to identify whether challenges to the national narrative were expressed either from within the military’s own ranks or from independent bloggers.

We depart from the idea that the emergence of counter-narratives in the sphere of security depends upon a few key dynamics that might vary with political context. Firstly, each political sphere is unique and should be examined on its own premises. Political culture is a central factor here. It might be easier to raise a counter-narrative in a ‘warring culture’, where debate on security is polarized because stakes are high, often involving decisions of whether or not to embark on large-scale military ventures. Such dramatic options make it is easy to grasp what to oppose and how to formulate an alternative. In contrast, where security is framed in a less existential manner, there may be less propensity to raise counter-narratives in the social media setting.

In the American political setting, security policy has often been articulated in terms of a polarization between those for or against American military interventions, and between those supporting American battles against communism or terror. It has been argued that whereas Anglo-Saxon states are characterized by heavily concentrated political systems and polarization between opposition and government, Sweden epitomizes a culture of consensus that encourages compromises and consent, a culture where secret agreements behind closed doors are favoured above open political debate (Levin, 2002). This has been widely felt in the sphere of security where – a few exceptions aside – the tendency is towards political agreements and very limited open political debate, a tradition re-enforced by the principles of non-alliance and neutrality that should not be openly questioned (Andrén, 1985: 139). However, the major re-structuring of the Swedish Armed Forces towards operational defence and cooperation with NATO along with the abolishment of the principle of neutrality (Agius, 2011) might bring about a shift away from ‘closed door’ politics, encourage political debate, and change the Swedish political culture into resembling the Anglo-Saxon culture more closely.
Secondly, narrative battles might work differently depending on the number of bloggers and audiences active in the social media community. The Anglo-Saxon sphere of social media is transnational and includes a very large community of social media users from different national settings. This favours the exposure of many different points of view. In small, non-English speaking communities, the social media sphere may be restricted to the national setting, which may generate a limited number of political debates. Social media activists may be less informed by debates in transnational media spheres and oppositional forces may become restricted in their critique of governmental narratives, which may hamper the articulation and success of oppositional narratives.

Thirdly, counter-narratives are more likely to thrive if the mission is widely debated in traditional media. This is more likely to happen when great powers are involved, since the economic expenditures, number of deaths, and so on tend to be of a large magnitude and have widespread consequences. Whereas the Afghanistan question has been widely debated in the US media and was an important issue in the 2012 presidential election, the effects of this discussion on Swedish society regarding the Swedish involvement in Afghanistan have been limited and the issue has generated limited political debate in the Swedish national news media.

Fourthly, the larger the number of new media users within the military organization, the more difficult it is for military commanders to control the output and to moderate counter-narratives from within their own ranks. Socialization is vital in the current media situation, as the words and deeds of a single soldier can have significant strategic consequences for the military (Johnsson, 2011). Through socialization, norms underpinning the purpose of the mission are taught and practised to such an extent that they may become internalized by each staff member and the organization culture as a whole. Communication flows are thus controlled indirectly and as a variety of versions of the governmental strategic narrative are expressed in a less formal manner by soldiers and ordinary people with whom the public can identify, rather than by officials and officers, the use of new media platforms can serve to strengthen governmental strategic narratives. It is plausible that in a small organization it is easier to socialize staff into reproducing the organizational culture and governmental narratives. Moreover, military blogging is a less widespread phenomenon among non-English speakers. Indeed, not one single blog from Norway or Sweden was registered on the international blog site Milblogging.com in 2012 (see also Resteigne, 2010 on the Belgium case).

These dynamics may be central to the understanding of counter-narratives in different political contexts. The ensuing investigation into whether the Swedish governmental strategic narrative was undermined by bloggers raising counter-narratives aims to provide empirical data and a better basis for discussing the relevancy of these dynamics. Sweden has taken an active contributory role in military operations sanctioned by the international community, and governmental strategic narratives outlining the Swedish position and role in these operations have been made public. Whether counter-narratives are produced on social media sites in response remain to be explored.
The power of social media in undermining governmental narratives

Constructing strategic narratives is key to the pursuit of legitimacy. We define strategic narratives according to Antoniades et al (2010: 5–6):

Strategic narratives are representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political elites attempt to give determined meaning to past, present and future in order to achieve political objectives. Examples include the justification of policy objectives or policy responses to economic or security crises, the formation of international alliances, or the rallying of domestic public opinion.

According to Freedman (2006: 23) ‘A successful narrative will link certain events while disentangling others, distinguish good news from bad tidings, and explain who is winning and who is losing’. Ringsmose and Börgesen (2011: 515–523) demonstrate that if a government succeeds in telling a consistent and persuasive story of a military intervention, the prospects of achieving public support increases. Their case studies on the British and Danish strategic narrative suggest that a strong and consistent strategic narrative makes for a public less sensitive to casualties.

In the past, the media tended to support national strategic narratives as it was largely dependent on security actors for information and journalists tended to cover foreign conflicts and crises in line with their countries’ government positions (Cottle, 2009: 112; Riegert, 1998). Extensive research has been performed on government censorship during wars and conflicts (e.g. Allan and Zelizer, 2004; Carruthers, 2000).

Today, however, social media have provided platforms for articulating alternative views on ‘security events’ ranging from the Iraqi conflict to the ‘Arab spring’. Scholars draw attention to the use of social media platforms to challenge governmental political messaging (Karatzogianni, 2008: 1–4). Touri (2009: 52–56) suggests that particularly during conflict and war, the blogosphere enables citizens to challenge official justifications of political decisions that affect the country’s interests. Although recognizing that the internet is used by both dominant cultures and subcultures, Kahn and Kellner (2004: 88) argue ‘The global internet, then, is creating the base and the basis for an unparalleled anti-War/pro-peace and social justice movement during a time of terrorism, war and intense political struggle’. Furthermore, blog users have come to view blogs as more credible sources for war news than traditional media (Johnson and Kay, 2010). Scholars focusing on the Anglo-Saxon sphere have tended to frame the new media as a disruptive force complicating and countering the American governmental narrative after 9/11 (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2009; Gardner, 2009; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Touri, 2009). In the US, the new media activism has set hurdles for governmental messaging in the sphere of security, complicating the American struggle for ‘hearts and minds’ (Gardner, 2009: 13). Andén-Papadopoulos (2009: 27) argues ‘This multiplying of perspectives, accessible on the World Wide Web, empowers internet users to go beyond the one-way broadcasts directed at them and to actively seek out other points of view on the tangled realities of war and its policies’.

Others are more pessimistic of the participative and democratic potentials of social media (Sandoval and Fuchs, 2010). Some highlight obstacles to contending narratives
and others argue that governments and military organizations put great emphasis on strategic communication and invest extraordinary energy and resources in refining and developing their own media outlets, including social media (Karatzogianni, 2009: 2). Opposing narratives may indeed be subjected to control and/or censorship by the market, states and other actors (Cammaerts, 2008). Morozov (2011: 26) contests the view of ‘cyber-utopians’, exposing how social media is used for the purpose of propaganda, surveillance and censorship to boost dictators and threaten dissidents: ‘The more Western policymakers talk up the threat that bloggers pose to authoritarian regimes, the more likely those regimes are to limit the maneuver space where those bloggers operate’. Wall (2006: 122) questions whether blogs provide alternative perspectives; even though bloggers protested the Iraqi war, they tended to follow the general tendencies of war reporting rather than reflecting alternative ideologies.

Moreover, governments and authorities can make use of new media to promote their own narrative. According to Hjarvard (2008), the media’s logic has penetrated the inner workings of other institutions in society since the 1990s. Non-media institutions are thus becoming more dependent on media institutions, and consequently their internal workings are becoming more similar to those of media institutions. However, non-media institutions that learn to take advantage of new communications technologies can develop their own media outlets and sources of information and therefore can also become more independent from the traditional media (see Jensen, 2011). Crowe and Hendershot identified a kind of officially sanctioned ‘organic/aesthetic militarism’ reproduced in the Canadian cyber space. Soldier blogs and online memorials to Canadian soldiers supply citizens with ‘…almost instantaneous textual, audio and visual access to the far-off battlefields of Afghanistan…’, a kind of imagery that invites them to feel patriotic and powerful ‘from the safety of the couch’ (Crowe and Hendershot, 2011: 82, 87).

Previous research thus provides opposing views on the power of counter-hegemonic narratives. Cammaerts and Carpentier (2009: 10–12) illustrate the complexity of this subject by highlighting that whereas some bloggers reinforce hegemonic discourses, others – family members of soldiers, veterans or bloggers describing negative experiences in the life of a soldier – articulate disapproval.

**Blogs about the Afghanistan mission**

National strategic narratives are indeed produced by governments, yet reproduced and cultivated also by other actors, including military agencies. The communication of narratives that breeds support for military campaigns is key to military strategy and modern warfare (Jensen, 2011: 193). A major challenge for the military is to communicate a coherent and consistent message to multiple audiences: the domestic audience, audiences in the targeted country, the media, its own troops and allies. Social media, including blogs, offers new ways for the military to engage with various audiences (see for example Himelfarb, 2009), but it also provides opportunities for bloggers to reinforce or challenge the governmental strategic narratives.

We conducted a case study of how a national blogosphere of individual bloggers related to the national strategic narrative’s depiction of a military mission. We asked how independent and official blogs differ and/or resemble one another and how they work to
legitimize or delegitimize the governmental strategic narrative. We implemented a structured qualitative content analysis situated within the critical discourse analysis tradition in an aim to disclose projections of hegemonic and oppositional views on security politics (Fairclough, 1995). The analysis seeks to determine whether the bloggers mainly challenge or comply with the national strategic narrative. We categorized the content of each blog post according to four key features of the blogger’s narrative: (a) the mission; (b) the purpose of the mission; (c) the Swedish achievements; and (d) national self-image of the troops, that is, whether the Swedish force is depicted as a peace-builder, a mentor, an aid-worker, a protector or a warrior.

We included Swedish individual bloggers – officially sanctioned as well as independent ones as explained above – active from January 2010 to April 2012, referred to under a shortened version of their blog signature and their web address. The three most frequently visited blogs of the officially sanctioned ones were chosen for analysis: Afghanistanbloggen (The Afghanistan blog, http://blogg.forsvaretmakten.se/afghanistanbloggen/), Armé-bloggen (The Army blog, http://blogg.forsvaretmakten.se/armebloggen/) and I skuggan av Hindu Kush (In the shadow of Hindu Kush, http://blogg.forsvaretmakten.se/iskugganavhindukush/). In addition we analysed the blog ‘Fredssoldater’ (Soldiers of Peace, http://www.fredssoldater.se/) that achieved wide public attention since it has been published as part of a long-standing exhibition at the Swedish Army Museum.

We identified two groups of independent blogs in the Swedish blogosphere, both of which were included in the study. Firstly, there were independent blogs on Afghanistan written by next of kin (i.e. family members to military staff in Afghanistan). Among the 33 blogs listed at a blog site for relatives we chose those that mainly focused on Afghanistan and that were actively used during at least six months of the research period: The army wife (http://thearmywife.blogg.se/), Bakomsoldaten (Behind the soldier, http://bakomsoldaten.blogg.se/), En Löjtnantessas dagbok (The Diary of a Lieutenant Princess, http://lojtnantessan.blogg.se/) and Dennadagenettliv (This day in one’s life, http://dennadagenettliv.blogg.se/).

Secondly, among other independent bloggers who published regularly on the mission in Afghanistan, we selected the most frequently visited ones, who published at least 10 blogs on Afghanistan and were active during the entire period of analysis. Following these criteria, we chose to analyse Wiseman, Chefsingenjören and three additional bloggers listed on their blog lists: Morgonsur (Bad mood in the morning, http://morgonsur.wordpress.com/), Cynismer (Cynicisms, http://cynismer.blogspot.se/) and Militärt med Gyllenhaal (Military matters with Gyllenhaal, http://gyllenhaals.blogspot.se/). A sixth blog, Efter bomben (After the bomb, http://efterbomben.bloggsida.se/), was added since it represented a particular perspective: a wounded war veteran blogging after returning home.

Independent bloggers meeting these two criteria formed part of an informal network of ‘defence bloggers’, widely heard in the public debate. They had the capacity to deliver a counter-narrative that could potentially undermine governmental narratives. They were well informed about defence matters and were linked to each other and communicated often among themselves. They were keenly aware of their status as independent as opposed to the Armed Forces’ official bloggers. Some have been quoted in traditional news media and publish articles of their own. The influence exerted by two of these
Bloggers, Wiseman and Chefsingenjören, is affirmed by the high number of visitors on their websites; they occupied second and third position on the list of the most popular Swedish political blogs in October 2012 according to the website Toppblog.se.

Bloggers publishing on behalf of a political party, non-governmental organization (NGO) or some other institution were not included in this study as the Afghanistan mission was not a main theme in their blogging. A few individual bloggers that commented critically on the mission were also left out, as they were not prominent in the public space; they were few in number, did not form a coherent network, had a relatively low number of visitors and attracted little attention from mainstream media. We estimated their ability to promote an influential counter-narrative as very limited.

**Blogs strengthening the strategic narrative**

Sweden participated in the UN sanctioned NATO-led ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) mission and during the research period the Swedish troops were based in four provinces of the northern region of Afghanistan. In 2010 a blogosphere centred on the Swedish mission had evolved. By this time, the ISAF mission had become focused on exit strategy, which included handing over responsibility to the Afghan National Army (ANA). The decision to initiate a process of transition to full Afghan security responsibility was taken at NATO’s Lisbon summit in November 2010. The subsequent focus on local population and authorities corresponded well with the Swedish tendency to highlight humanitarian issues (Wagnsson, 2011).

Yet, this period of time also was different from a Swedish perspective, as one of intensified combat and ensuing losses. To make sense of the sustained participation in the riskful mission, officials stuck to the practice of highlighting humanitarian aspects. The governmental strategic narrative focused not exclusively but mainly on humanitarian ideals. The Defense Minister Sten Tolgfors (29 July 2009) stated ‘Sweden is in Afghanistan for the sake of the Afghan people’. He placed the suffering of Afghan civilians above other rationales for involvement and particularly focused on the situation of Afghan women and girls (Tolgfors, 22 June 2010; Tolgfors et al., 2010). Tolgfors defined the aim as ‘strengthening the country’s capacity to provide for its own stability, security, democracy, and human rights as well as create better living conditions and sustainable economic and social development for its people.’ Although he did recognize that as a part of its engagement, Sweden would have to favour other interests in the realm of foreign policy, security policy, development and national interests (Tolgfors et al., 2010).

In the Government Bill of 2010 on Afghanistan, the mission was presented as an example of Swedish solidarity (with the international community) – one that contributed to its record of engagement in international crises (Swedish Government, 2010a). The Foreign Ministry stressed solidarity and humanitarianism when explaining the engagement in Afghanistan (Swedish Government, 2010b), elaborating more on human rights and development issues than on interests and threats to Swedish security. Secondly, the intervention was rationalized in terms of Sweden taking responsibility for the global, UN-based, order. The third and final rational for intervention was the Swedish interest in keeping Afghanistan secure and stable, in view of international terrorism, regional stability and drug trading. According to this strategic narrative, the military mission aimed to...
maintain security and stability in order to enable political reforms, reconstruction and building up Afghan security forces (Swedish Government, 2010b: 20).

Our analysis, summarised in table 1 below, shows that although differing with regards to perspectives, both kinds of blogs mainly strengthen the governmental narrative. They projected a shared belief in the capacity of Swedish troops and an appreciation of the Swedish Armed Forces’ achievements in Afghanistan. None of the blogs questioned Sweden’s participation in Afghanistan or other international missions, although the independent blogs problematized the progress of the mission. They supported the governmental narrative by focusing on humanitarian aspects of the mission and on Sweden’s role as facilitator for stabilization and long-term social reforms for the Afghan population.

The official blogs represented the ‘boots-on-the-ground’ perspective, and the independent blogs presented strategic and policy perspectives sometimes in combination with an operational perspective. Both lent an overwhelming support to the Swedish mission and numerous accounts of good services provided by the troops to the Afghan population. The Swedish troops were said to provide preconditions for stability and good governance; they were seen as do-gooders, peace-builders and mentors for the Afghan army and police forces.

The official blogs strengthened the governmental strategic narrative more blatantly than the independent ones. At an operative level they reaffirmed the humanitarian norms promoted by the government by depicting how the troops were making a difference in peoples’ everyday life, training Afghan security forces, delivering clothes, encouraging Afghan women to participate in public life, and so on. The next-of-kin bloggers also supported the governmental strategic narrative by indicating that the soldiers were there to help people. The relatives positioned themselves closely to their partner/soldier and to the troops. They were occasionally critical of the Armed Forces, but only with regards to terms of employment, not with regards to the Armed Forces’ presence or activities in Afghanistan. The independent defence bloggers questioned the government’s ability to verbalize the purpose of the mission to the Swedish public and its ability to transmit a positive and true image of the mission. They also criticized the government for failing to provide the Armed Forces with sufficient resources. Yet, they supported the Swedish presence in Afghanistan and showed their appreciation of the Armed Forces and their continued activities in Afghanistan and beyond. The findings are further discussed below.

**Views about the mission**

Both official and independent bloggers projected a positive image of the Swedish presence in Afghanistan. The official bloggers – represented by military staff on site – took a micro-perspective and wrote about their experiences in diary format. Whether they were commanders, ordinary soldiers or medical staff, the official bloggers remained ‘on the ground’ far from the political structures and debates of the Swedish political elite. They reported on their jobs and assigned duties uncritically, and the way in which they described their daily tasks were in line with the governmental narrative. They had both civilian and military tasks, and they were trained and prepared for them. One official blogger stated ‘Swedish soldiers are good at doing their job with a human focus’ (I
When occasionally expressing their attitudes to the mission, the next-of-kin bloggers also indicated that they also had made sacrifices on the behalf of the mission and were proud of the troops’ accomplishments:

I am sitting on a park bench and drinking my coffee and cannot help thinking what a blessing it is for Afghanistan. They get to borrow a group of very good people. Competent, intelligent and able guys and gals who do their best to do their part. They work hard. They struggle. And we lend them to the Afghans like it is the most natural thing in the world to do. Not without a little bit of nagging first, but in the end we do it anyway. Perhaps not to create a better world but because that is part of their job as a soldier. It is what they do and who they are. But I would like to think that it is to create a better world. (Dennadagenettliv, 25 February 2012)

A recurring argument was that the military had made a difference to the local population and that its presence was vital in order to secure civilian aid. The fruitfulness of this strategy – winning hearts and minds – was pointed out in various blogs. In this sense, building playgrounds and handing out gifts would not be possible without the uniform and the presence of arms and military vehicles, but nor would the task of stabilizing the security situation be possible without friendly conversations with the locals and visits to schools. A veteran blogger illustrated this typical position:

I also believe more aid and civilian organizations are needed in Afghanistan, yet unfortunately it is necessary to have some soldiers to help with security matters. Soldiers with weapons who are able to defend themselves against armed Talibans who mess things up for their own people

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<th>Table 1. Overview of content of official and independent blog narratives.</th>
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<td><strong>Critical/supportive of mission</strong></td>
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<td>Strongly supportive; the mission is a good thing and meaningful on a micro-level, benefiting civilians.</td>
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<td><strong>Critical/supportive of mission purpose</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Critical/supportive of achievement</strong></td>
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<td><strong>National and military self-image</strong></td>
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with acts of violence. The [Swedish] soldiers are not there to conduct war but rather to safeguard peace. This is exactly what the Swedish soldiers do every day in Northern Afghanistan. (Efter Bomben, 23 May 2010)

The independent defence bloggers firmly stated their belief in a long-term commitment. This was particularly stressed after an incident in February 2010 when two Swedish soldiers were killed. In their opinion, the answer to these kinds of incidents was not withdrawal, but rather staff and equipment reinforcement.

The purpose of the mission

The purpose of the mission spelled out in official as well as independent blogs and in the governmental strategic narrative was for the Swedish troops to aid and assist the local population by establishing a stable security situation that in turn would enable civil reconstruction, democracy and development. The key here was to provide security for civilians in order to enable long-term development, which indicates that idealistic rather than realist geopolitical viewpoints dominated the narratives, although there are occasional references to the need to avert terrorism (i.e. fight insurgents).

There were few explicit comments in support of the mission purpose as stated in the strategic narrative by the official bloggers. Instead diary notes illustrated with words and pictures demonstrated how the Swedish military had established stability by simultaneously assisting and working in collaboration with the local population (see, in particular, Afghanistanbloggen and Armé-bloggen). The official bloggers also elaborated on what they considered to be personal reasons for being in Afghanistan – reasons that were treated as compatible with the national official purposes – such as desire for action, comradeship and economic benefits. In blog posts depicting ceremonial events, for example the honouring of homecoming soldiers, statements were sometimes made about the purpose of the mission from the individual soldier’s point of view. In one such post, a soldier expressed pride in his work for the Afghans and his contribution to creating a more secure world (Thungren, 16 December 2010). Typical of the official blogs, this blogger presented the purpose of the mission as his personal stance in the work carried out by the Swedish Armed Forces – a viewpoint that closely reflected the governmental strategic narrative.

Some of the next-of-kin bloggers gave evidence to convincing expressions of idealism as they argued their belief that the Swedish soldiers were in Afghanistan to do good and help create a better world. Support for the mission purpose among the independent defence bloggers was mostly demonstrated through their depictions of Swedish achievements, yet Cynismer (1 August 2010) explicitly connected with the governmental narrative when justifying the Swedish participation in ‘the war in Afghanistan’:

The war in Afghanistan is a necessary evil in order to forge a reasonable livable environment for the inhabitants. The war in Afghanistan is a necessary evil in order to impede the spread of terror, to show that it is not okay to fly airplanes into skyscrapers, and to protect those who performed this task. The war in Afghanistan is also a necessary evil in order to get a good reputation in the international arena. In the modern world no one can stand on the sideline; everyone gets involved in some way and then you have to acquire white bullets in order to be able to draw on the support of others. (Cynismer, 1 August 2010)
Views about Swedish achievements

Both the official and the independent blogs pointed to the positive achievements and argued that the Swedes had made a difference. They differed, however, in the way that they presented the achievements. The official blogs elaborated on the day-to-day activities and most blog posts were structured in a way to project a positive closure at the end of each text. The troops might have encountered difficulties and dangers while carrying out the tasks, but the end result was encouraging: soldiers returned happily to camp, often receiving positive remarks from their superiors. A tense confrontation with armed Afghans turned into a constructive dialogue with Swedish soldiers, a medical team was caring for civilians and receiving appreciation and trust, and a seemingly hostile and desolate village had turned to a life of football.

These achievements were presented as daily performed duties (good services provided for the civilian population) carried out in absolute openness with no hidden facts or intentions. There was the deaf-mute boy that the Swedes helped place in an orphanage and later they came back to check up on him as well as the training of prison guards in cooperation with other allied forces, the Swedish troops delivering clothes to a local community, and so on. By reporting on personal experiences of daily activities, they conveyed the impression of meaningful tasks that were leading to a better situation in a very complex conflict environment. Chief of PSYOPS Ingeibrikt Sjövik talked about how delivering Christmas presents to children, overseeing market places and socializing with locals benefited the security situation for both the locals and the Swedish military:

The civilian population of Afghanistan is generally very content with the work we perform together with the Afghan security forces. It is a heart-warming experience to be able to travel down the main road of Mazar e Sharif and watch hundreds of girls walking to school. Afghanistan still has a long way to go, but with our help they have already come a long way… I am proud of what I do, but most of all I am proud of the job that our Swedish soldiers perform.

(Sjövik, 24 November 2011)

The independent bloggers agreed with the official bloggers that the Swedish troops were performing well. However, rather than reporting positively on daily tasks and inviting the public to identify with the Afghans, they highlighted the excellence of the Swedish troops and defended their efforts and achievements against critical leftist politicians including ‘Mona (the leader of the Swedish Social Democratic Party, authors’ remark) and her musketeers’ (Cynismer, 27 August 2010). Morgonsur wrote:

Take care over there, soldiers. And don’t listen to people who do not know what they are talking about. You will succeed. Yet unfortunately the fiercest commentators will never understand, thank, or praise you for your efforts. (Morgonsur, 19 October 2010)

This brought to the fore the question of transparency and openness of the government in regards to Swedish achievements – a major question to several of the independent defence bloggers. Propositions were being made by Wiseman for increased transparency in the Swedish military operations in Afghanistan as he argued this
would lead to increased legitimacy and support for the troops. It would most likely also strengthen the demands for more resources to be allocated to the Swedish ISAF mission, he claimed. The defence bloggers repeatedly called on the politicians to address the public and to give them ‘the full story’; that is, depict the mission and the contribution to peace and stability in Afghanistan in all its complexity, difficulty and bravery.

Despite strong support and appreciation for the Swedish troops by official and independent bloggers alike, there were also occasional depictions of unsuccessful operations and critical views on achievements. Several of Chefsingenjören’s texts concern the issue of transparency and openness. He problematises Sweden’s dependency on the US and the poor performance of the US (for example 15 December 2011). The independent defence bloggers claimed the lack of progress of the ISAF mission was due to weaknesses at the strategic and policy levels. Even the official blogger Joel Thungren talked about difficulties in the field. In one of his blogs he questioned the Swedish presence, arguing it might be doing more harm than good. Yet in line with other bloggers who sometimes had doubts about their own and the Swedish contribution in Afghanistan, he concluded ‘…they need our help’ (Thungren, 5 June 2010).

National self-image of the troops

The official and independent bloggers assigned the Swedish troops multiple roles that resonated well with the governmental strategic narrative: the Swedes are soldiers and mentors to the Afghan army, with both military and civilian tasks aimed at building good relations with the civilians and helping ordinary Afghans. Whatever role they fulfil – be that of a mentor, good-doer, aid-worker or warrior – they perform honourable duties on behalf of their home country. While the official bloggers expressed satisfaction with the soldiers’ work, the independent bloggers went so far to call them ‘heroes’.

The predominant self-image among the official bloggers was one of a ‘good-doer,’ someone who uses most of their time to forge good relations with civilians. The official bloggers projected the self-image of an able professional soldier carrying out his/her daily tasks, including village inspections, meetings with village elders, road patrols, football games with the local children and promoting girls’ education.

The fight against insurgents and other war stories were conspicuously absent, with the exception of the official blog Fredssoldater. The blogger Joel Thungren wrote in detail about repeated attacks by insurgents that were met with counter measures, rescue operations of wounded Swedish soldiers and the salvaging of damaged vehicles. This work was often described as long and tedious and performed under difficult weather conditions with soldiers close to panicking in the blazing sun.

ANA (Afghan National Army), ANP (Afghan National Police) and our units have been involved in battles several times. Quite a lot is happening here in the High Chaparall of reality. Yesterday we experienced an IED (Improvised Explosive Device) attack followed by gunfire. — Soon after the attack, the platoon leader himself came running to our tank and confirmed that they had hit an IED and that everyone was still alive, but that the driver was in ‘a hell of a lot of
pain’. My commander then took charge and started a return attack in order to seize ground. At the same time the counter attack started, the military column was attacked by so called ‘small arms fire’ (assault rifles and machine guns). Then we heard some rattling and we were informed that the military column was under attack from the front. We responded with gunfire, and then the enemy stopped shooting. (Thungren, 18 September 2010)

The independent bloggers also recognized the soldier/warrior role. They highlighted that being a mentor to the Afghan Army by default involved war-fighting, and they urged politicians and the media to acknowledge the soldiers’ tasks for what they were, irrespective of public reactions. As Wiseman (6 March 2011) put it: ‘Putting make-up on a pig rarely pays off’.

Although sporadically revealing fear and even hate of insurgents, the bloggers rarely denigrated the enemy. Yet the independent bloggers turned against a range of ‘others’ to sustain the national self-image of the troops as professional moral agents working hard to realize the governmental strategic narrative. They sympathize with the troops against the public, who did not understand the situation in Afghanistan, and against the political elite, who did not recognize the needs and resources demanded in a mission such as the one in Afghanistan, and finally against critical voices in the media. Bloggers also occasionally used the US as the ‘other’. One argued that Sweden was there not for the sake of the US but for the sake of Afghanistan. Another one was highly critical of the US strategy, which was much too focused on ‘hunting terrorists’. A third one complained that US troops’ misbehaviour was putting others at risk and argued: ‘We are more humble than many other nations, we are more open-minded to things we do not understand, and we are above all damn nice to those we work with. Other nations are characterized by other attitudes’ (I skuggan av Hindu Kush, 12 January 2012).

Conclusions

Previous research has argued that social media provide platforms for articulating counter-hegemonic narratives that challenge the national strategic narrative. However, our study shows that a blogosphere might also support such a narrative. Scholars have indeed questioned the counter-hegemonic capacity of the social media, but their focus has been on the efforts of the authorities to use social media as a means to pursue hegemonic narrative and to suppress their critics. In contrast to this, we went beyond the narrow focus on authorities’ efforts, and concentrated on individuals’ use of social media.

More specifically, our analysis shows that in small non-English speaking communities, such as the Swedish one, social media platforms might not challenge strategic narratives to the same extent as in the Anglo-Saxon sphere. Whereas in the US, family members of soldiers on duty and veterans used blogs not only to support but also to question and protest against the war in Iraq (Cammaerts and Carpentier, 2009: 11), Swedish defence bloggers used the mission in Afghanistan to try to bolster the role of the Swedish Armed Forces and hail their use in out-of-area missions. Although providing diverse images of the mission in Afghanistan, both official and
independent blogs analysed in this article mainly supported the governmental strategic narrative.

The Swedish bloggers questioned the government’s ability to voice a strong strategic narrative. Previous research indicates that governments’ failure to forge a coherent and consistent official narrative tends to undermine public support for the mission (Callahan et al., 2006: 564; Jankowski, 2013: 20; Ringsmose and Börgesen, 2011: 523). Jankowski shows that French public support for the Afghanistan mission was eroded by weaknesses of the narrative in combination by compelling counter-narratives; Callahan et al. (2006) point out that there was lack of a coherent, relevant and widely articulated national narrative about the war on terror prior to September 11; and Ringsmose and Börgesen characterize strong strategic narratives as having few competitors. We add to previous research by highlighting a case where counter-narratives were weak despite the lack of a strong strategic narrative. Although not directly censored or controlled, the bloggers – official as well as independent – remained supportive of the strategic narrative, even though they recognized its weaknesses. In contrast, Christensen shows that the US army had to prevent its troops in Iraq from posting their own video clips on YouTube, in order to avert counter-narratives from appearing (Christensen, 2008: 172). This case thus supports those sceptical of the disruptive potential of social media (e.g. Cammaerts, 2008; Morozov, 2011) and adds to their line of reasoning by highlighting the narrative of bloggers.

Further research is needed to determine whether our findings are generally valid. Do supportive blog narratives dominate in other non-English speaking communities, such as France, Italy or Germany? We believe that our findings may serve as a basis for such future comparative studies, in particular those findings that relate to the factors outlined in the introduction.

Firstly, scholars need to take into consideration the political climate of each state. The Swedish case illustrates that a consensual political culture gives less propensity for a counter-narrative to emerge. The Afghanistan mission rarely reached the top of the political agenda. It might have been difficult to generate a distinct counter-narrative against what was perceived as a quite nebulous governmental narrative. The narrative was not formulated in binary terms, relying heavily upon enemy images. Indeed, when the independent bloggers protested against the governmental strategic narrative, it was above all a critique against the lack of clear arguments. The mission might also have appeared as a natural consequence of the ‘blue helmet’ tradition of demonstrating loyalty to the UN by participating in international missions. This corresponds well with the emphasis on protecting humanitarian ideals in Afghanistan. This line of argument was not likely to generate a counter-narrative.

Secondly, the size and scope of the social media sphere matters. If, as in Sweden, the blogosphere is confined to the national setting, support for the national strategic narrative becomes stronger as a result of the fact that there is a relative lack of influence from social media users in other national settings and cultures.

Thirdly, the image of the mission portrayed by news media has an impact on the propensity for counter-narratives via social media. If more Swedish soldiers had died or if Swedes had been reported as being involved in scandalous events, this might have sparked public debate and in such a climate a counter-narrative might have developed.
Fourthly, successful socialization of the military staff is likely to encourage soldiers to comply with the official narrative and hamper counter-narratives from arising within the military’s own ranks. The Swedish military is characterized by its flat organization and fairly large degree of transparency. The Afghanistan contingent is small, as is the sphere of Swedes who work with or have worked with international operations. This might facilitate a high degree of integration of the mission’s purpose and tasks into the military culture and acceptance by the troops. There is thus a relatively high degree of socialization and less need for a strict horizontal order-command organization. In such an environment, there might be less propensity for strong feelings of opposition and for individual soldiers to feel the need to voice their discontent.

In conclusion, Kahn and Kellner (2004: 91–92) frame bloggers as ‘techno-activists favoring not only democratic self-expression and networking, but also global media critique and journalistic sociopolitical intervention’, and highlight their use of Google bombs as a tool for political subversion. Our case study suggests that blogs are also used to sustain hegemonic narratives and should not be underestimated in this function. We need to ask what this means for the formulation of governmental aims in the security sector and what bearing the new media situation has on processes of legitimization in the sphere of security in different regional contexts. Is the new media more of an asset than a problem for many governments – perhaps in particular for governments beyond the Anglo-Saxon sphere – in the area of security and defence policy?

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Notes

1. A critical case study can be used to challenge theory (Yin, 2009: 47). The Swedish case challenges the proposition of previous research that counter-hegemonic narratives articulated via new media undermine national strategic narratives in the sphere of security.
2. All quotes have been translated by the authors.

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