Cyberspace is an ‘emergent phenomenon’ of the Information Age at the beginning of which, for better or worse, humanity now finds itself. No good historian would yet attempt to write a history of its impact upon human society because it is still too early to tell. Nevertheless we implicitly understand that it is very large because cyberspace already touches so many aspects of daily life. Individuals, groups, corporations and governments are investing enormous amounts of time and money in cyberspace. It is transforming the way we do all sorts of things from the ways in which we make money and govern ourselves to the ways in which we maintain friendships and find spiritual and intellectual sustenance. It is also changing the way that we fight wars of all sorts, including insurgency.

Insurgency is also an emergent phenomenon. As John Mackinlay (2009: 5) explains, amongst its most salient features is that it naturally reflects the society from which it emerges:

the techniques of an insurgency evolve with the societies from which it arises. Since the Cold War the pace of social change has accelerated dramatically, not just in the rich, secure nations of the northern hemisphere, but also in developing countries as they have become gripped by global change. Just as the structures of these societies have altered out of all recognition, so it is possible that an insurgency arising from them can take on unforeseen characteristics. Furthermore, if the communications revolution has given birth to global communities and global movements, so too can it herald a form of insurgent energy that is de-territorialised and globally connected.

That is what has driven its evolution from one form to another over the ages. The changes of human society in accordance with technological, social and environment developments cause changes in insurgency, the quintessentially bottom-up form of warfare. This chapter is about the interaction of these two emergent phenomena: how cyberspace is exploited by ‘global insurgents’ in order to achieve a reach, sophistication and virulence which they otherwise would not have; how insurgency is being shaped by cyberspace, shifting the centre of gravity in such conflicts from populations defined by territory to the ‘virtual dimension’ where identities are more fluid and transnational; and how both, possibly, are shaping the global political economy in which we all live causing consternation in the defence establishments of the world about the utility of conventional forces.
Holding onto reality: information and human history

In order to understand the form of insurgency which inhabits and preys upon the digital ‘Information Society’ (Drucker 1969; Bell 1974; Masuda 1981; Castells 2010) we need to start with an understanding of the precepts which govern that society. It is worthwhile considering this in long perspective because one of the troubles with much of the literature on cyberspace is that it tends to begin with the invention of the microchip, or the World Wide Web, and as a result tends to overemphasize recent change over longer historical continuity. That said, neither should one underestimate the magnitude of the developments which have occurred in just the last two decades.

There are three basic things which can be done with information: it can be transmitted (communicated); it can be stored; and it can be processed for analysis for manipulation. In all human history from the time we acquired language until today there have been just five ‘information eras’. In each of these the archetypal forms and sophistication of information processes produced different patterns of politics, culture, science, religion, economy and war. Let us review them briefly.

Before literacy all information was transmitted by voice, communication was ‘one-to-one’ or very few. The range of communication was limited to that of the human voice and the only means of information storage was human memory. About 100,000 years ago we learned to ‘tally’ – to record the quantity of things with beads, notches on a bone, or knots in a string (Schmandt-Besserat 1998: 158–61), and about 5,000 years ago primitive accountants learned how to record both the quantity and type of things by the use of clay tablets on which data was inscribed by means of pressing the cut end of a reed into wet mud in a patterned manner – logographic writing, literacy as we know it, was born (Schmandt-Besserat 1998: 192).

But for approximately the next 6,500 years until the invention of the mechanical printing press in the mid-fifteenth century only a small elite enjoyed the fruits of written knowledge. The range of transmission in this era was as far as a letter could be carried (at no more than the speed of a fast horse or ship). Information was stored in semi-durable form in semi-organized libraries but information processing was rudimentary as knowledge tended to be esoteric and fragmentary, scattered as it was in handwritten texts guarded jealously by ‘craft’ scholars and clergymen who very largely constituted the literate class.

Mass literacy was not an immediate impact of the invention of mechanical print – it was more a development of the Industrial Revolution, which began over 200 years later. In fact what was initially important about mechanical print as opposed to craft script was its relative orderliness and uniformity. Print media has no inherent superiority over handwritten script in terms of range or velocity of communication either, but it could be produced in huge volume (although the cost of initial typesetting was formidable) which caused a vast expansion in the sum of overall knowledge; moreover, coincident developments in cataloguing, indexing and other aids to data analysis made possible more complex information processing.

Print, therefore, tended to have a bridging and unifying effect in science; but in socio-politics and religion, by contrast, its impact was divisive and fragmenting, ‘making possible pamphlet wars and doctrinal polarization’ (Kaestle 1985: 19). It is no coincidence that scholars such as Hobsbawm dubbed the era which coincided with mass literacy the ‘Age of Revolution’ because mass conflicts over ideas and beliefs are practically impossible to conduct without mass media. Thus we see that while history is peppered with insurrections from the biblical period onward, insurgency in the sense of guerrilla tactics plus mass political subversion is essentially a modern concept.
People often associate mass communication with radio and television. This is, however, incorrect. After all in 1830, according to Stephens, 100 years before radio’s ‘Golden Age’ *The Times* of London was already hitting a mass audience, selling 10,000 copies a day in a city of two million. The actual significance of electronic media relative to machine print is not so much in relative audience size as it is in fidelity of transmission – sounds and especially images have much greater emotional impact than text because they convey a functional facsimile of reality as opposed to a mere description.  

It is hard to overstate the importance of this in the history of insurgency: revolution needs icons and symbols – images that ‘embody a sense of universality of blight and at the same time innocence’, in the words of an Iranian writer quoted by Ravitz on the image of the death of Neda Soltan, a young woman murdered by a pro-government *Basiji* militiaman in June 2009 while protesting the disputed Iranian elections. Images are particularly potent icons; in consequence they have huge potential propaganda power; moreover, the velocity of electronic communication is potentially instantaneous and global, allowing a large audience to experience an event anywhere in the world in real- or near real-time – further heightening its potential shock effect.  

Much ink has been devoted to the study of traditional media and insurgency and war; nonetheless, it is worth outlining the main findings of that literature as explained by Livingston, particularly as it relates to expeditionary counterinsurgency campaigns, before going on to look at the impact of digital ‘new media’ (Livingston 1997). First, it is understood that the media acts as an *accelerant* of events, contracting decision-making time in a crisis. Second, it is often regarded as an *impediment* to the exertion of force over a long period by democratic states, because by injecting emotional content in coverage it gradually undermines public support and political will. And third, it is thought to have a main role in *agenda setting* potentially leading to the reordering of foreign policy priorities by spotlighting a particular crisis.  

In the counterinsurgency literature there is a wide consensus that this matters because it is believed by theorists such as Mack and Arreguin-Toft that ‘big nations lose small wars’ not because their forces are defeated in the field but because their domestic will becomes exhausted by the perception conveyed (whether accurately or inaccurately) by the media that the conflict is ‘unwinnable’ or ‘not worth it’. This is the master narrative of American failure in Vietnam (Rid 2007) and French failure in Algeria (Horne 1977), for instance – and is rapidly becoming the leitmotif of the NATO campaign in Afghanistan; the basic effect, however, was pithily encapsulated by Colin Powell (quoted in Livingston 1997: 5):

> [The American people] … are prepared to take casualties. Even if they see them on live television, as long as they believe it’s for … a cause that is understandable … They will not understand it, if it can’t be explained.

Insurgents quickly realized the power of media spectacle to rocket a cause onto the international agenda. Before 9/11 there is no better example of this than the attack on the 1972 Munich Olympic Games by the Palestinian terror group Black September which killed 11 Israeli athletes. The attacks were widely decried – even by the Palestine Liberation Organization which feared that the Palestinian cause had been damaged by the atrocity – yet they were also hugely successful. As Black September (quoted in Hoffman, B. 2006: 70) boasted: ‘A bomb in the White House, a mine in the Vatican, the death of Mao Tse-Tung, an earthquake in Paris could not have echoed through the consciousness of every man in the world like the operation at Munich.’ Recognition that the main function of insurgent operations is the attraction of the media spotlight, rather than death and destruction per se, is readily apparent in Carlos Marighela’s
famous *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla*. And it is evident as well, shows Aust, in the operations of European anarcho-communist terror groups such as the Baader-Meinhof Gang who were very skilful propagandists; indeed, Ulrike Meinhof was a noteworthy journalist who had written for the influential German leftist magazine *Konkret* before founding the gang with Andreas Baader and Gudrun Ensslin. British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was not wrong to say at the height of the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland that, publicity was the ‘oxygen’ of terrorism:

In this evil strategy, the actions of the media are all important. For newspapers and television, acts of terrorism inevitably make good copy and compelling viewing. The hijacker and the terrorist thrive on publicity: without it, their activities and their influence are sharply curtailed. There is a fearful progression, which the terrorists exploit to the full. They see how acts of violence and horror dominate the newspaper columns and television screens of the free world. They see how that coverage creates a natural wave of sympathy for the victims and pressure to end their plight no matter what the consequence. And the terrorists exploit it. Violence and atrocity command attention.

Which brings us to the present day in which it is said that information on digital networks – stories, innovations and data on practically every subject imaginable – has replaced labour and fixed capital as the central organizing principle of society. Whereas modern industrial society was relatively ordered, unitary and centralized, the *post-modern* information society has quite different characteristics. While information society theorists might differ on detail or emphasis most would agree that they include intangibility (Rifkin 2000: 55), miscellaneousness (Weinberg 2008), horizontality and self-organization, anonymity, digital ubiquity and societal fluidity (Hassan 2008; Borgmann 1999; Kallinikos 2006).

Consider the impact of digitization on the three things which can be done with information. Twenty years ago just a handful of countries could afford colossally expensive secure and instantaneous global communications, now anyone with a laptop and a network connection can:

- **transmit** information whether ‘one-to-one’ or ‘one-to-many’, effectively globally and instantaneously in a variety of forms from text to video;
- **process** information (i.e. copy, cross-reference, cross-check, combine or manipulate it) easily and cheaply with standard commercial software;
- **store** information in vast quantities almost indefinitely on cheap, miniature and portable digital devices, or indeed in the ‘cloud’ independent of any particular device.

We live in an ‘information ecology’ (whether or not we wish it) which is denser, more ever-present and pervasive than has existed before. Manuel Castells (2009), one of the most prominent scholars mapping the contours of the new Information Society, calls the communications paradigm of this new era ‘mass self-communication’. It is a profoundly important development – at least as important as the invention of print and perhaps as much as literacy itself – with significant impact on all aspects of social life, including insurgency and war.

In media studies, Marshall McLuhan’s aphorism ‘the medium is the message’ (McLuhan and Fiore 1997) holds something of the same position as does Clausewitz’s famous maxim ‘war is the extension of politics by other means’ to students of war. In the 1960s McLuhan discerned the emergence of what he called a ‘global village’ as a result of the rise of global communications. War, he argued, in this situation would take the form of a ‘war of icons’ in which the belligerents would seek to defeat their rivals by the erosion of their ‘collective countenance’ with...
‘electric persuasion . . . dunking entire populations in new imagery’ (McLuhan 2001: 370). He was ahead of his time, but not by much; what McLuhan saw building in the early 1960s is now a self-evident reality – just look around, according to the United Nations the chances are now one in two, wherever you are in the world, that the person next to you will own a mobile communications device – in the Western world ‘personal electronic devices’ (i.e. all the things you are asked to turn off on airplanes on take-off and landing) outnumber people by a wide margin.

Increasingly scholars and statesmen speak of ‘mediatized’ wars while commanders apprehend that the centre of gravity of the wars they are in exists more in the virtual dimension than the physical one, in the perception of the conflict more so than its material actuality. No one has captured this more eloquently than the British general Rupert Smith who has written that ‘we are conducting operations now as though we are on stage, in an amphitheatre or Roman arena’ and who describes the role of the theatre commander in this sort of war as akin that of a theatre or film ‘producer’ (Smith 2006: 284–5).

Some analysts, Castells most importantly, argue that de-territorialized insurgency is the paradigmatic conflict type of the Information Age. ‘The conflicts of our time’, he writes, ‘are fought by networked social actors aiming to reach their constituencies and target audiences through the decisive switch to multimedia communication networks’ (2009: 49). Before dismissing such claims as academic fancy it is worth noting that senior officers on either side of the Atlantic have said similar things. For instance, Britain’s Chief of Defence Staff, General Sir David Richards argued recently in a speech to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, ‘Conflict today, especially because so much of it is effectively fought through the medium of the Communications Revolution, is principally about and for People – hearts and minds on a mass scale’.

The massive concern of defence and foreign policy establishments on either side of the Atlantic with ‘strategic communications’, ‘information operations’, ‘public diplomacy’ and other variations on propaganda (to give it its proper name, see Taylor 2006) also reflects and reinforces Castells’ point. What better confirmation of the relevance of his thesis than the words of both the current and previous US defence secretaries that we are not only in a media war but losing it? Said Donald Rumsfeld in a 2006 speech, ‘Our enemies have skilfully adapted to fighting wars in today’s media age, but for the most part we—our country—our government, has not adapted’; while according to Robert Gates in 2007:

> It is just plain embarrassing that al-Qaeda is better at communicating its message on the internet than America. As one foreign diplomat asked a couple of years ago, ‘How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world’s greatest communication society?’.

Thus far we have seen no conflict which might be described as insurgency in cyberspace – that is to say insurgency in an entirely ‘virtual community’; such a thing is theoretically possible, perhaps it is even inevitable once (if) the digital environment evolves politics worth subverting and overthrowing; for the time being, however, insurgency in cyberspace is science fiction. What is real, however, is the way that cyberspace has infused conflict of all types, bringing on a dimension of rhetorical conflict which is no less consequential for being intangible. To quote al-Qaeda’s number two Ayman al-Zawahiri, ‘I say to you that we are in a battle, and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media’.

Also it has given insurgency tools which lend it a global reach, sophistication and capacity for strategic impact which it did not have previously. Let us turn now to that development.
The arsenal of insurgency

‘We must be the great arsenal of democracy’, said President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in a famous speech on 29 December 1940 enjoining America to gird itself for the challenge of the Second World War. According to Lind and subsequently Hammes, the Second World War II – the quintessential industrial war, war based on mass of men and machines – has been superseded by a new type, ‘Fourth Generation Warfare’ (4GW). The gist of 4GW theory is that for a number of reasons, largely technological but also political, economic and cultural, war can be categorized according to four types:

- first-generation warfare – the sort waged by Napoleon involving muzzle-loading artillery, muskets, and columns and lines of infantry and cavalry;
- second-generation warfare – as seen during much of the First World War, conducted with massive formations employing indirect firepower and quick-firing infantry weapons;
- third-generation warfare – which began with the German light infantry tactics of 1918, developed a theory of all-arms coordination including armour and aircraft in the interwar period, and reached a sort of apotheosis with the German ‘Blitzkrieg’ in 1940 (with limited repeats in the Six-Day War in 1967 and the Gulf War in 1991); and,
- fourth-generation warfare – largely a post-Second World War development, which is said to combine guerrilla tactics, or civil disobedience, with disinformation campaigns and political activity exploiting ‘soft networks’ to directly attack enemy political will, as opposed to regular military forces.

According to Hammes (2005: 190), 4GW ‘uses all available networks . . . to convince the enemy’s political decision-makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit’. The resemblance of 4GW to insurgency is readily apparent; indeed much of the criticism of 4GW focuses on its lack of novelty (Van Creveld 2005), also its dubious historical grounding (Freedman 2005). Yet even so the concept deserves contemplation for two reasons. First, because 4GW theorists were amongst the first to talk about the socio-technological changes which have been transforming warfare, as opposed to the merely technological ones which so enthralled enthusiasts of the so-called ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’ for most of the 1990s (Hoffman, F. 2006; Betz 2006, 2007, 2008; also McMaster 2008).

Socially, the world is dramatically smaller. In 1945, the vast majority of people in the world knew only their own village. Even in developed nations, most knew only what they read in their newspapers and had little or no contact with people of other nations. Today, citizens of developed nations communicate with and travel freely around the globe. Small generators and satellite TV have delivered the world to even isolated, primitive villages.

(Hammes 2005: 196)

In other words, even before the advent of the World Wide Web had really gathered a head of steam 4GW was beginning to describe the power of connectivity to shift the centre of gravity of insurgency from the local to the global – and subsequently, as we shall see, to the virtual. Second, 4GW observed a development which has become perhaps the central problem of contemporary counter-terrorism:

4GW practitioners are making more and more use of materials made available by the society they are attacking. This allows them to take a very different strategic approach.
It relieves the 4GW practitioner of the strategic necessity of defending core production assets, leaving them free to focus on offence rather than defence. It also relieves them of the logistics burden of moving supplies long distances. Instead, they have to move only money and ideas—both of which can be digitized and moved instantly.

(Hammes 2005: 207)

The 9/11 attacks remain the exemplar of this type of attack in scale if not sophistication but there are numerous instances of it both before (such as the bombings of the Marine Barracks in Beirut, Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia and US embassies in Africa) and after (notably the bombings in Bali, Madrid and London). The November 2008 attacks in Mumbai which killed at least 173 people, wounded more than 300, and shut down a major world city for three days represent a worrisome harbinger of what death, destruction and disruption can be achieved with a combination of low-cost civilian systems and highly motivated personnel using basic infantry tactics and weapons. The attackers’ equipment consisted of AK-74 assault rifles, ammunition, home-made hand grenades, energy bars, mobile phones (the supply of which they replenished from their victims) and a hijacked civilian fishing boat, all of which (including the weapons) are readily available anywhere in the world, with the possible exception of totalitarian ‘securocracies’ such as North Korea.

To date, no terror or insurgent group has combined a physical attack with a simultaneous cyber-attack, for instance to disrupt emergency response systems, although analysts such as Professor Peter Somers of the London School of Economics quoted by the Daily India have raised expectations that ultimately they will do so – most likely around the London 2012 Olympics; nor have there been any attempts at cyber-terror, although hacking by state and non-state groups for espionage and profit is increasingly prevalent (Michael 2010). But the search for examples of ‘pure’ cyber-terror or cyber-insurgency misses a larger point: as Seymour Goodman et al. (2007) put it, ‘cyberspace always touches ground somewhere’, and the 9/11 attacks, the Bali bombing, London’s 7/7 bombings and the massacre in Mumbai are examples of cyberspace touching the ground; al-Qaeda’s mode of operation, the whole concept of ‘global insurgency’ makes no sense without the dense web of interconnectivity which is cyberspace; without it there would be no global forum into which to transmit their narrative of repression and resistance through propaganda of the deed (Betz 2008; Bolt and Betz 2008), no secure global communications capability for planning, recruitment and financing of their organizations, and no open-source intelligence and analysis network in the form of the World Wide Web which is integral to their functioning.

‘History will not portray Osama bin Laden as a mere terrorist’, wrote Berkowitz (2003: 17), ‘Rather instructors at West Point and Annapolis will cite him as one of the first military commanders to use a new kind of combat organization in a successful operation’. No one has explored the operational concept of this ‘new kind of combat organization’ further than John Robb, a software entrepreneur cum strategist who describes it as ‘open-source warfare’ drawing a parallel with the open-source movement in software development. The gist of Robb’s argument, that war is being transformed from a predominantly closed and state-centred affair to a more open one in which non-state groups can challenge nations and win, rests on two bases:

- ‘Superempowerment’ – an idea which holds that the digital technologies which collectively are bringing on the Information Age also enable insurgent groups to organize themselves in flexible, non-hierarchical networks which can work collaboratively on tasks of mutual interest, arm and educate themselves, gather intelligence, and plan and pursue strategies which they could not have done otherwise.
Cyberspace and insurgency

- ‘Systems disruption’ – essentially an Information Age relabeling of the time-honoured guerrilla tactic of exhausting one’s adversary through attacks on their societal infrastructure (physical, economic or political) as opposed to their organized military forces, except enhanced by the fact that in digitizing so many aspects of their critical societal infrastructure advanced states have created potentially vast new vulnerabilities.

As with 4GW, to which ‘open-source warfare’ acknowledges a significant intellectual debt, a criticism which may be aimed at Robb’s thesis is that it is hardly novel – after all Van Creveld’s *Transformation of War* declared the end of state-centred war more than 20 years ago, Mary Kaldor’s *New and Old Wars* claimed to distinguish a whole new non-state war type almost 15 years ago, and it has been over a decade since Robert Kaplan’s *Atlantic* article ‘The Coming Anarchy’ was reworked into a book with similar predictions (Van Creveld 1991; Kaldor 1998; Kaplan 2001). Nevertheless, though he might not have been the first to voice them, Robb’s ideas are increasingly empirically confirmed by the research of other scholars.

Historically, insurgencies have been forced to make trade-offs in optimal structure between that which lends the greatest capacity and that which provides the most resiliency. Traditional hierarchical groups have good military capacity, strong political organization and subversive potential; but they are also rigid, relatively easily infiltrated and can be dealt a death blow if their leadership is decapitated. By contrast, horizontally-networked groups operating in the manner of a grassroots social movement are more fluid, difficult to penetrate and less vulnerable to catastrophic collapse upon the death of a leader; the trouble with them is that their offensive capability rests upon only a handful of individual operators. ‘Superempowerment’ makes these trade-offs less stark: ‘leaderless jihad’ – networked insurgent groups able to act in a cohesive and purposeful manner despite an apparent lack of organizational structure – becomes possible (Sageman 2008).

The main problem with Robb’s ‘global guerrillas’ thesis is its fixation with tactics. To be sure the factors which underlie the Information Age, i.e. intangibility, anonymity, digital ubiquity, etc., do have malignant effects, super-empowering small groups who aim to pull the whole system down using the tools of civilization against it; but while the tactical opportunities for such groups to cause ‘system-disruption’ are fascinating (and frightening) it is not really clear how this technique is supposed to lead to the achievement of actual political ends. For that we need to turn to another group of scholars who are looking at global insurgency more strategically.

**The insurgent blogipelago**

Two scholars are particularly noteworthy, David Kilcullen and John Mackinlay, both of whom have attempted to define ‘global insurgency’ and explain its operational method; their thinking has much in common, perhaps most importantly they share a degree of iconoclasm. According to Kilcullen (2006: 11), the rise of global insurgency means ‘a traditional counterinsurgency paradigm will not work for the present war: instead, a fundamental reappraisal of counterinsurgency is needed’. In similar vein, Mackinlay (2009) likes to refer to ‘Maoism’, by which he means classical insurgency (i.e. in the pattern of Mao Zedong’s successful insurgency in China and of his Cold War era successors and emulators), and ‘post-Maoism’ by which he means the form of insurgency which prevails today (‘Bin Ladenism’ has not taken off as a descriptor).

Global insurgency, as they describe it, is a popular social movement which feeds on local grievances, integrating them into broader ideologies and linking disparate conflicts through globalized communications; its aim is to change the (global) status quo through an admixture of propaganda.
of the deed, subversion and open warfare; both are keen to delink analytically the wider social
movement which is Islamism from any specific terror group such as al-Qaeda; and at the centre of
both analyses is the de-territorialized essence of the phenomenon, the networked nature of global
insurgency which allows it to act in a concerted manner despite the apparent lack of structure.
Mackinlay’s theory is perhaps bolder and more thoroughly developed. He delineates Maoism
from post-Maoism across a range of categories. For example: Maoist insurgent objectives are
national, whereas post-Maoist objectives are global; the population involved in Maoist insur-
geney is local and singular, whereas the multiple populations involved in post-Maoist insurg-
geney are dispersed and unmanageable; therefore the centre of gravity in Maoist insurgency is
local, whereas in post-Maoist insurgency it is multiple and possibly irrelevant; the all-important
subversion process in Maoist insurgency is top-down, whereas in post-Maoist insurgency it is
bottom-up; Maoist insurgent organization is vertical and structured, whereas in post-Maoism it
is an unstructured network; and whereas Maoist insurgency takes place in a real and territorial
context, the post-Maoist variant’s vital operational environment is virtual (Mackinlay 2009; also
Betz 2008). His starkest finding is that the expeditionary campaigns of the War on Terror have
essentially missed the point, achieving nothing at best or actively harming the West’s security at
worst because,

The communities which are the heartlands of the insurgent energy, the energy that has
attacked our cities and our populations, live and act on a different plane. They stretch
around the world in an archipelago of individuals, cells and communities; they have no
territory, they exist in isolated but interconnected groups that are horizontally-related
rather than vertically ordered, and their shared sense of outrage is regenerated by the
exertions and the visibility of the campaign. In these wispy, informal patterns, without
territory and without formal command structures they are not easily touched by the
kinetic blows of a formal military campaign.

(Mackinlay 2009: 6)

In other words the impact of cyberspace on insurgency is neither mysterious nor confined to a
purely digital sphere. In actuality, just as cyberspace ‘touches the ground’ in our daily lives pro-
ducing different forms of economic, social and political organization and modes of activity, so
too is it exploited by new forms of insurgent groups which seek to challenge the status quo in
new ways.

Some insurgents have been significantly empowered by this process. It is important to bear
in mind, however, the mechanism by which such groups operate in order to understand the
nature of the threat they represent. In future, it may be the case that some of these groups obtain
and employ some form of weapon of mass destruction – indeed there is a certain frightful inevi-
tability to current technological and social trends which seem likely to intersect at some point
in a truly massive terror attack, beyond the point of which it is even more difficult than usual to
make predictions. In the meantime, however, the strategic operating concept of global insur-
geney is the propaganda of the deed event.

The most significant work on this nineteenth-century phenomenon, updated by twenty-first
century insurgency, has been done by Neville Bolt. According to Bolt, propaganda of the deed
‘acts as a lightning rod for collective memory’; it is a communications tool designed to unlock
a set of assumptions in the target population – it is akin to political marketing or, as Smith might
have put it, ‘theatre’. The major difference between propaganda of the deed in the past and
propaganda of the deed now is not its essence as a communicative act, after all that is long estab-
lished. As Jan Schreiber (1978: 113; see also Crelinsten 1989) wrote over 30 years ago:
Cyberspace and insurgency

The more one considers terrorism as a phenomenon, the less it resembles other forms of violence and the more it looks like a form of communication. There is a ‘speaker’ (the terrorist), an ‘audience’ (the primary victim and all the other onlookers in the world), and a ‘language’ (the threat of violence against an innocent party).

Rather, the difference is the existence now of a truly global, sensory-rich, dense, immersive and interactive digital ‘mediascape’, conveyed in part if not largely, by cyberspace – an Information Society, in short – in which the resonant aftershock of the propaganda of the deed event can propagate, triggering associations with societal memories in an ‘archipelago of violence’. Global insurgency is a virus of this emerging system; unfortunately, it is not at all clear yet what is the appropriate antibody.

Conclusion

The 9/11 attacks changed attitudes towards the study of insurgency: not just because the exigencies of Iraq and Afghanistan forced reluctant armies to once again contemplate countering it, but because the norm of ‘regular’ conflict in the opinion of a number of prominent strategists looks decidedly irregular (Evans 2003; Gray 2005). Of course there is debate over how long this will last and what to do about it (Gentile 2008; Nagl 2008; also Betz 2007). In this chapter it has been argued that the shift is profound and lasting, not that other forms of conflict are obviated by the new one, but that inevitably as the organizing principles of human society have changed with technological development, above all in the range, forms and velocity of communications, so too has changed the pattern of warfare generally and the character of insurgency specifically. In many ways insurgency, when understood in the sense of an ideational conflict conducted largely by non-violent means through propaganda and persuasion (although punctuated with sharp conflict), has become mainstream.

The study of insurgency too after many years of being regarded as a niche area, despite the fact that this has been the most prevalent form of conflict since 1945 (Holsti 1996), has also entered the mainstream. Along the way it has become vastly more vibrant, polyglot, multidisciplinary and generally heterogeneous than it was in the past. Mackinlay’s and Kilcullen’s work are the best available syntheses of a number of important themes from diverse fields. These include: examination of global insurgency as Islamic activism, defined as the ‘mobilization of contention to support Muslim causes’, using social movement theory (Wiktorowicz 2004); analyses of the concept of ‘globalized Islam’ and the ‘virtual Ummah’ (Roy 1994, 2006; Kepel 2004, 2006), the de-territorialized population which is the prize of global insurgency, and of its relationship with the process of radicalization, particularly of Muslims in European countries which increasingly face what are essentially domestic counterinsurgencies amongst a significant non-integrating minority (Stevens and Neumann 2009); and the updating of the concept of propaganda of the deed for the twenty-first century (Bolt and Betz 2008). If anything unifies these diverse studies it is a preoccupation with the new ‘virtual territories of the mind’, as Mackinlay calls it, or ‘cyberspace’ as it is more colloquially known, which contemporary insurgency haunts.

Notes

1 Emergent phenomena occur when simple entities operating in accordance with basic rules exhibit complex behaviours collectively. They tend to arise when a complex system possesses a high degree of diversity, organization and connectivity. Complex behaviours of a collective are not easily deduced
from behaviour of the individual entities that make it up. Examples of emergence are legion, including
the flocking of birds and fish, ant colonies and slime moulds, traffic patterns, urban development, the
stock market, weather systems and human consciousness (Holland 1998; Johnson 2001).
2 Lavishly embellished, handwritten translations of ancient texts were one-offs – each more or less differ-
ent from one another. A mechanically printed book, on the other hand, was always the same and once
disseminated could become an authoritative text (i.e. the same whether you read it in Rome or Riga).
3 Dozens of examples of popular insurrection ranging from Quintus Servorius’ revolt against Roman
rule in Spain from 81 to 72 BCE to William Wallace’s against the English King Edward I in Scotland
at the end of the thirteenth century are to be found in the first four or five chapters of Asprey’s com-
prehensive two-volume work War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History. These required deft political
skills, generally in order to unify diverse and fractious tribes against an encroaching imperial power; but
the only plausible example of mass subversion in this era is Christianity’s penetration of the late Roman
Empire – not covered by Asprey but clearly Edward Gibbon (1789) saw it in roughly these terms in
his masterwork The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire although he did not use the terms insurrection
or insurgency.
4 Consider the difference between the written score to Beethoven’s ‘Ode to Joy’, for instance, as
opposed to a tape recording of the same. Both are in a sense recordings, the former marked out with
ink on paper, the latter in modulations on a long ribbon of magnetized material; one, however,
requires the mind of a trained musician to interpret while the other, given a tape player, is in effect the
symphony itself.
5 Numerous examples of iconic photos which produced enormous effect on the perception of conflict
exist: Vietnamese girl screaming in fear and pain fleeing a napalm strike; summary execution in the
street of a Viet Cong guerrilla by the Saigon police commander; young woman wailing over the body
of a student shot by National Guardsmen at Kent State University; these are just a few images seared
into the collective consciousness, easily recalled and requiring no captionation.
6 So cheaply that online retailers and search engines do this in microseconds every time a user performs a
search, gradually building an ever-more sophisticated profile of each individual with each interaction.

Recommended readings

Wars and Insurgencies, 19 (4): 513–43.


References


Director of National Intelligence, News Release No. 205, 11 October. Available at: www.dni.gov/

University Press.


(2): 221–43.


