War in the Smartphone Age: Conflict, Connectivity and the Crises at our Fingertips by Matthew Ford, London: C. Hurst & Co Publishers, 2025, 312 pp., ISBN 1805263749

The Locardian Threshold

Armed conflicts increasingly involve activities in the digital domain as well as in the physical world, and Matthew Ford highlights vital and timely insights into how civilian technology shapes contemporary warfare. He should know. His agenda-setting work resonates deeply with the themes explored throughout this volume, particularly in how digital technologies transform war's conduct, documentation, and interpretation. In a separate work, his forthcoming book *War in the Smartphone Age,* his careful examination of that now iconic device's role in modern conflict offers a framework for understanding the inextricable linkages between civilian technology and military operations. He achieves this in at least two explicit ways, and implicitly in one way that is, more often than not, elided by scholars and practitioners alike

One of these is Ford's fine-grained attention to context. *War in the Smartphone Age* presents readers with detailed case studies of excruciating human tragedies and vistas of violence in all their trench-line orthodoxy, from Hamas's October 7 attacks to Ukraine's resistance against Russian invasion. He adjusts the aperture to focus on the interfaces between civilian technology and military operations in specific geographical and temporal contexts. In a detailed discussion of US and Coalition special operations in Iraq nearly 20 years ago, for example, he sets out the technological and targeting antecedents of what is now on full display in Ukraine, where civilians use personal drones and WhatsApp to coordinate with artillery officers.

This is fascinating in its exemplification of how context shapes technological adaptation in warfare. More, it serves as an important reminder to members of a newer generation who may or may not have a sense that their personal devices are part of a military kill chain. Ford wields the evidence like a sledgehammer, leading the reader to the unavoidable conclusion that anything short of close study, thick description and narrative tracing – of the technology itself, and of the specific circumstances of its deployment – is a woefully deficient unpacking of war's vicissitudes.

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The political economy of war technologies emerges as another crucial element of Ford's work. One remembers a time when terrorists were said to occupy "virtual" online training camps described without so much as a nod to the physical information, computing and telecommunications technologies that make internet-facilitated interactions possible. No such flights of fancy here. Ford's investigation of commercial tech in modern conflict never strays from its corporeal and practical realities, and reveals how private sector interests increasingly shape – indeed, dictate – military capabilities. Companies like Amazon Web Services, Microsoft, and Google have become essential to military operations in Ukraine and have shifted the balance of power between state and corporate actors.

This aspect of Ford's work reveals how the privatization of military capabilities creates a breathtakingly expansive set of civilian and military dependencies, integrations, vulnerabilities and ultimately, representations. It is a point that aligns with several contributions in this volume, particularly Migle Bareikyte and Mykola Makhortykh's examination of the uses of artificial intelligence and large language models in wartime image-making and propaganda. Some of Ford's views on this are nicely revealed in *War in the Smartphone Age*. In one fascinating chapter, for example, he recounts his experimentation with open-source intelligence (OSINT) analysis. It is a field, he notes perceptively, that has evolved apace with new technologies, and self-differentiated along tracks trod by intelligence specialists, on the one hand, and criminal investigators, on the other.

The implication of this divergence is an aesthetic and applied appreciation of evidence, in its documentation and in its handling, that is increasingly forensic. The reference here is not to the historian's predilection for describing as "forensic" any finely detailed study, regardless of the purpose of the work or the methods applied to it. Nor is it even a reference to something more Rankean in its appreciation of history as a legalistic reading of what evidence reveals about a matter. It is, rather, a reference to the fundamentals of forensic science and the collection and preservation of evidence for presentation in a court of law.

At the heart of this is Edmond Locard's exchange principle, namely that "when two objects come into contact with each other something is exchanged and taken away by both objects."[1] In an era of participatory warfare, to use Ford's terminology, contact surfaces have multiplied exponentially, digital technologies generate vast amounts of potential evidence, and each social media post, metadata tag, and digital interaction creates and transfers trace evidence that could be crucial for future historians, social scientists, criminal investigators and lawyers.

1 Graham Gooch and Michael Williams, "Locard's Principle," *A Dictionary of Law Enforcement* 2nd Ed (Oxford University Press, 2007), https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191758256.001.0001/acref-9780191758256-e-1927, Accessed 5 Dec 2024.

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If digital technologies and participatory warfare imply a Locardian threshold, it is this: evidence is surely multidisciplinary, as the late legal scholar William Twining famously noted, but what wartime actors and observers do with it has tipped toward a particular set of approaches.[2] UN fact finding missions in Syria, Iraq and Myanmar, non-profit entities such as the Commission for International Justice and Accountability, Forensic Architecture, and Bellingcat, and academic initiatives like the Berkeley Protocol have been pointing heartily to this demand for higher standards for more than a decade. Military "document exploitation" units in wartime, and post-genocide "documentation centers", have been doing the same for far longer.[3]

What this rich forensic history indicates, and what Ford and the contributors to this volume forcefully demonstrate, is that what were once merely complex issues, are now, as seen on the battlefields of the Russo-Ukraine war, even more so. Digital technologies transform military operations and blur the line between war and peace, soldier and civilian. They also force attention to how we document, preserve and make use of information. Scholars and practitioners risk short-changing the utility and impact of collected evidence through wilful neglect of such basic elements of investigative and research practice. The challenge of tracing, preserving, authenticating and processing digital traces remains a critical area requiring further inquiry, especially given the ephemeral nature of social media content and the ease with which digital information can be manipulated or lost.

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2 See, for example, William Twining, *Rethinking Evidence: Exploratory Essays* 2nd Ed (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006) [original 1990).

3 See, for example: Michelle Burgis-Kasthala, "Assembling Atrocity Archives for Syria: Assessing the Work of the CIJA and the IIIM", *Journal of International Criminal Justice* 19:5 (2021): 1193–1220; Vladimir Petrovic, *The Emergence of Historical Forensic Expertise: Clio Takes the Stand* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017); Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman, *Mengele's Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics* (London: Sternberg Press, 2012); Nancy Amoury Combs, *Fact-Finding Without Facts: The Uncertain Evidentiary Foundations of International Criminal Convictions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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