

Journalism's Deep Memory: Cold War Mindedness and Coverage of Islamic State

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This article considers the coverage of and by Islamic State in conjunction with a mind-set established during the Cold War. It illustrates the degree to which U.S. journalism shapes coverage of Islamic State via interpretive tenets from the Cold War era as well as Islamic State's use of the same tenets in coverage of itself. The article raises questions about the deep memory structures that undergird U.S. news and about their travel to distant, unexpected, and often dissonant locations.

Keywords: journalism, memory, Cold War, Islamic State

Collective memory's redo of the past for present aims has always been about more than just remembering, with tasks associated with identity formation, power consolidation, and community building at the fore when invoking the past. But what happens when memory's agents strategically fixate on patterns of action and understanding that do not reflect how people think they engage with others? This is what has happened with one kind of memory in U.S. journalism—that of the Cold War—as replayed in one kind of current coverage—that associated with Islamic State. Coverage of and from Islamic State follows clear tenets set in place during the Cold War, raising questions about the deep memory structures that undergird U.S. news and about their travel to distant, unexpected, and often dissonant locations.

On Collective Memory and Journalism

Collective memory's role has been readily hailed for providing a kind of history-in-motion, one that reconfigures rather than retrieves information, sees the past in the present rather than as colonized and separate, and unabashedly refracts events and issues through a subjective, particular lens rather than an objective, universal one (Halbwachs, 1952/1992). With vast and intricate memory work accomplished

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all the time by institutional settings that have little to do with memory per se—like politics, law, and education—memory silently and strategically permeates collective life, allowing individuals in such institutions to impact engagement with the present by tweaking how and what about the past is remembered.

Journalism is no exception to these circumstances, although it constitutes an odd vehicle of memory (Zelizer & Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2014). Known most obviously for its play to the immediate, instantaneous, and topical, the news provides a first record of events, which is supposed to turn to others like historians for more prolonged engagement. Memory, aligned with subjectivity, emotions, and the imagination, is not expected to surface in the news, and journalism's affiliation with a certain kind of modernity—in which expectations about growing the so-called civilized world depend on rational, present-oriented journalism—makes this worse.

The tension this creates grows because collective memory pops up when it is least expected. Rearranging group loyalties at will and providing clear cues for what's worth defending and preserving—what Susan Sontag (2003) called "collective instruction" (p. 84)—is not linear, logical, or rational. Instead, it represents only parts of the past and rarely displays fidelity to its so-called true features (Zelizer, 1995). This work consequently makes odd bedfellows of disparate events and issues, constituting, as John Gillis (1994) once noted, "tools we think with, not things we think about" (p. 5). News coverage thus expertly blends references to old and new, remembered and experienced, familiar and strange in ways that make the distinction between past and present less relevant than ever before. It is no surprise, then, that journalists look backward all the time, despite the fact that doing so goes against the grain of what they are expected to do.

Looking backward takes on different forms across the news, although the reliance on memory tends to spike when journalists need to make sense of crisis and the instability of its unfolding events and issues. As they struggle, not always successfully, to situate what is happening in a larger frame, they engage in "double time" (Zelizer, 1993), which allows them to speak in both present and past, connecting the here and now with a certain there and then and fastening in place strategic memory work. Thus, *The New York Times* speaks of "watching Iraq, seeing Vietnam" (Whitney, 2003), whereas a *TIME* magazine cover depicts a Depression-era bread line under the title "The New Hard Times" (2008).

This makes even journalism's most prosaic memory displays intentional and potentially suspect. Rewrites, revisits to old events, and commemorative or anniversary journalism all work because they provide stability at the level of shared meanings, even if the information itself is skewed or wrong. Thus, when journalists build analogies, comparisons, or yardsticks between seemingly dissimilar events and issues from past and present, it is worth noting what has been included and excluded because they are cues to what strategically lies underneath.

Moreover, such forms, as Grusin's (2010) work on premediation has shown, often inject the past-present relation with a futurist orientation, particularly when crisis is involved. Papacharissi (2014) elaborated on the anticipatory affective activity on social media that helps shape an event at its inception, whereas Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger (2015) showed how temporal orientation is creatively managed

across new and old media. All demonstrate that events are regularly shaped in systematic ways before they take on a recognizable shape as news stories.

Although these obvious mnemonic forms underscore how much journalism looks backward, its less obvious forms deserve a closer look. This is where one finds the deep-seated parallels used all the time to shape the news. In this regard, Cold War mindedness, the mind-set that accompanied the Cold War, becomes relevant. Although it is one among many such deep memories undergirding the news, its contents fit current circumstances particularly well.

The Persistence of Cold War Mindedness

Cold War mindedness offered a way of making sense of nearly five decades of enmity between the United States and the Soviet Union.² Relying largely on journalism's involvement, it capitalized on the fact that the public knew little of foreign affairs and would be slow to challenge journalistic claims. As journalists were subjected to loyalty oaths, special favors in exchange for sympathetic coverage, subtle censorship and red-line edits on news copy, ties between U.S. government officials and journalists cohered around a recognition of U.S. exceptionalism, with journalists often becoming eager spokespeople for those in power. As the trade journal *Editor and Publisher* avowed in 1948, "American newspapermen are Americans first and newspapermen second" (Security Problem, 1948, p. 36).

Cold War mindedness constituted a stance on the world that was driven by homogeneity and conformity. Its dissemination rode on acts of compliance, deception, stereotyping, black-and-white thinking, polarization, simplification, and demonization that produced a worldview with distinct characteristics. As Daniel Boorstin then observed, the United States could accommodate only one enemy at a time, and the more clearly it was able to distinguish itself from its nemesis, the better equipped it would be to carry out its aims. Most U.S. citizens, wrote Boorstin (1960, p. 36), understood the Russians by "lump[ing] bolshevism with anarchism, syndicalism, socialism, free love, atheism and other unfamiliar notions into a single explosive parcel." It reflected "a center of poverty, oppression, misery, aristocracy and decadence" (p. 24). By extension, the United States was seen in polar opposite terms that celebrated its exemplary nature.

Cold War mindedness thus rode upon a packet of simple and mutually supportive interpretive tenets that strategically encouraged individuals to make sense of the period in particular ways. More far-reaching and deep-seated than either a simple interpretive frame or social construction, these tenets were pulled together to drive social engagement across the board, producing acquiescent politics, rigid family structures, firmly marked gender roles, uniform standards of fashion, and homogeneous popular culture.

² This study is taken from a book-length project analyzing the establishment of a Cold War mind-set in mainstream U.S. news media during the Cold War's formative years (1947–1962). The project tracks the mind-set's dimensions and maintenance in coverage over time, particularly its importation into coverage of multiple post-Cold War conflicts. Islamic State constitutes one example. For this article, media relays by Islamic State from 2014 to the present were analyzed alongside the analysis of U.S. media relays during the same time period.

In news, it involved conforming to a particular narrative view of the world that relied on accepting certain strategic notions of enemy formation, abiding by specific expectations of public action during conflict, and upholding carefully crafted attitudes about war (Zelizer, 2016a). Together, the dimensions of the deep structure that resulted worked to contextualize, rationalize, and support the claims of the Cold War mind-set, helping to explain how, in Dallas Smythe and Hugh Wilson's (1968) words, a "system designed for the free expression of opinion accepted a cold war propaganda rhetoric out of touch with the free world" (p. 67).

Unseen War Is Real

One central support for Cold War mindedness is the idea that war does not have to be visible to be believed. Fostering the notion that unseen war is real if enough people with power will it so, invisible war was central to the Cold War's sustenance as a way of making sense of the world. Limited to the U.S./USSR nexus and by definition sidestepping the various physical conflicts raging across Asia during the same time period, Cold War mindedness wrestled with the fact that there was no obvious war to be had—no battles, wounded, corpses, or concrete physical skirmishes between the United States and the Soviet Union—just an information campaign that took place largely through the media. Coined by one journalist, Herbert Swope, and given wide circulation by another, Walter Lippmann (1947), the Cold War was less a war than a label or an idea. Journalists of the time thus needed to imagine war to signal its existence to the public, constructing into being conflict that could not be shown through journalism's obvious tools of information relay.

The symbolic dimensions of an unseen war, what Mary Kaldor (1990) called "the imaginary war," thus took flight. Phrases such as "the iron curtain" and "containment" signaled a blocking of the free flow of information, whereas "the Soviet bloc" or "the evil empire" connoted imperviousness to the West, enhanced when juxtaposed with the moral clarity of a phrase such as "the free world." As the plural pronouns *we* and *our* peppered news discourse, amorphous descriptors like "communist infiltration," "counterinsurgency," "sphere of influence," and "power vacuum" offered little understanding of the human impact of the actions being discussed. Images in the news reflected similar parameters: In July 1948, *Life's* coverage of the Berlin blockade featured a two-page city map, with an illustrated barrier at its western boundary alongside the caption "Blockade of Berlin is shown symbolically in this map, with American, British and French sectors enclosed within an imaginary wall" (Hughes, 1948, pp. 72–73). The fact that *Life* imagined into existence a Berlin wall some 13 years before it was erected speaks to imagination's potency in lending clarity to the Cold War's ambiguous cues.

Unseen war's persistence—consonant with Foucault's (1977) elaboration of Jeremy Bentham's notion of the panopticon and the unseen acts of surveillance, control, and punishment that displaced medieval spectacles of suffering—had multiple long-lasting effects on journalism: It encouraged simplicity, muddied the factual landscape, and invited a conceptual foundationalism that drove the formula for coverage of later conflicts. Although the struggle for the "minds of men" had obvious vehicles—Voice of America and Radio Free Europe—it had less obvious ones, too. The very necessity of imagining war depended on all of U.S. journalism's ready participation, so much so that the very idea of information relay became grounded in a repair to what could not be seen. It is no surprise, then, that its specter helped describe struggles as wide ranging as the Israeli-Lebanese conflict of 1982, the 1983 U.S. invasion

of Grenada, and the 1989 U.S.–Panama conflict, where officials in each case restricted access to military operations and made war’s imagination critical to its reception and public support. Reporters learned that what they “could not see they imagined” (Adler, 1991, p. 408).

Cold War mindedness did not disappear when the Cold War ended in 1989. Instead, it went underground, surfacing over time as an available interpretive frame for multiple crises in search of meaning. It is here that it has functioned as deep memory, even though it now involves terrains of a different geographic, political, and symbolic order. Ranging across struggles for human rights, the economic order, the environment, world health, and population control, among others, multiple conflicts have been willed into existence via unseen war and its assists—smart bombs, drone attacks, digital monitoring, collateral damage, and virtual war.

Even when conflict is real, its journalistic treatment can make it seem less so. Thus, U.S. TV coverage of the 1991 Gulf War looked like a Nintendo game with unmanned live cameras and computer-driven graphics, but no depicted war (Zelizer, 1992). The 2003 U.S. war on Iraq was described as a “see-no-evil” unseen war (Kamiya, 2005), whereas the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey prompted one journalist to tweet whether the absence of television meant that the coup had failed or that “in 21st century you don’t need to capture TV anymore?” (Pfeffer, 2016, para. 1).

It is no surprise, then, that Cold War mindedness—complicated by the lingering trauma associated with Vietnam, revived after 9/11, disrupted by the 2003 war on Iraq—has surfaced in conflicts involving the United States both explicitly and implicitly since 1989. Much of this has involved the former object of U.S. enmity: In 2008, *TIME* magazine called then-budding tensions with Russia “a new cold war,” depicting a masked Russian soldier raising his fist on its front cover (“How to Stop,” 2008) (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. "How to Stop a New Cold War" (2008).

From the 2010s on, more direct comparisons prevailed across enterprises such as *The New York Times*, the Brookings Institution, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *The Nation* (Bittner, 2016; Charap & Shapiro, 2014; Soergel, 2016; Vanden Heuvel, 2016). Other "enemies"—Cuba or Islamic terrorists in Mumbai—received similar journalistic treatment, but much recent attention has focused on enmity in the Middle East. As *The New York Times* said of building tensions with Iran, "what worked in the Cold War will work with the mullahs" (Sanger, 2010, p. WK3). Or, in *Al Jazeera's* view, "For Washington, Iran is the ideal regional enemy. If it had not existed, the Pentagon would have created something close" (Bishara, 2010, para. 20).

The repair to Cold War mindedness has experienced a revival due to current information and military environments, which highlight the coexistence of hierarchical and networked structures of meaning (Ronfeldt & Arquila, 2001). The combination of irregular warfare and information technology constitutes what Arquila and Ronfeldt labeled "netwar"—modes of conflict that stop short of total war, but whose combatants organize, strategize, and communicate along network lines that are "largely about 'knowledge'—about who knows what, when, where, and why, and about how secure a society, military, or other actor is regarding its knowledge of itself and its adversaries" (Arquila & Ronfeldt, 1996, p. 4).

This fusion of conflict's informational and physical dimensions offers conditions for information relay that are well suited to the deep contents of the Cold War mind-set. As Ronfeldt and Arquila (2001) argued, effective networks require "a grounded expression of people's experiences, interests and values" (para. 63), communicating a sense of identity, belonging, cause, purpose, and mission. Cold War mindedness provides one such script for collective action, where it "can help keep people connected in a network whose looseness makes it difficult to prevent defection" (Ronfeldt & Arquila, 2001, para. 64).

Thus, it is no surprise that invoking Cold War mindedness also happens unexpectedly, in media systems from afar. Although not the only way of making sense of the news, most recently it has surfaced in the coverage associated with Islamic State, including both U.S. news outlets old and new alongside Islamic State's relays of itself.

Cold War Redux: U.S. Versus Islamic State

Although the activities of Islamic State go far beyond the United States, the primacy of U.S. media efforts in the global flow of news warrants particular attention when considering the media and Islamic State. In that the West's "primary concern in the [Middle East] has always been containment: of Soviet ambition, of Arab radicalism, of both Sunni and Shia Islamism, of Iraq and Iran, of the 'axis of resistance'" (Harling & Birke, 2015, para. 17), the reliance of these aims on media activity invites a parallel with the Cold War. Labeled "magical thinking" (Shatz, 2015), U.S. engagement with Islamic State is unlike that of the Cold War in that Islamic State's war is real and incurs casualties and damages, but both its information component and responses to it are central to its capacity for action. In this regard, media coverage of and by Islamic State—both its internal and external media activity—offers a classic example of Cold War mindedness.

According to insurgency scholar Neville Bolt (2012), current media engagement between those for and against Islamic State exemplifies “the weight of the media [turning] against the media” (p. 24) in an intense struggle for information dominance. As the United States and Islamic State engage in the irregular and largely information-driven battles of “open online warfare, on a battlefield chosen by . . . jihadist[s]” (Fisher, 2015, para. 6), they find themselves in an environment enriched by Cold War tenets. With netwar encouraging both sides to pursue strategic aims online and off-line, the current environment rides upon information’s successful delivery via individuals whose ideological positions are expected to be consonant with official aims. This makes facilitators of information relay strategically instrumental: “The media people are more important than the soldiers” (quoted in Miller & Mekhennet, 2015, p. A1), noted one former Islamic State media operative. As a BBC correspondent said of Western journalists, filtering information about Islamic State is not “just a case of doing challenging journalism—a good thing—but of demonstrating appropriate moral outrage. We had to show which side we were on” (Wood, 2016, para. 45).

U.S. Coverage

On the U.S. side, repairing to Cold War mindedness has helped journalists take on their role as warriors in an information war. U.S. information efforts—hailed, like those of other Western nations, as stopgap measures that “maintain a foothold . . . until there can be greater . . . military involvement” (Cobain, Ross, Evans, & Mahmood, 2016, para. 10)—have focused on “deploying mostly symbolic tools” (Harling & Birke, 2015, para. 28). Under the motto “media is more than half the battle” (Allendorfer & Herring, 2015, para. 4), the official efforts of agencies like the U.S. State Department’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications—emblemized by the “Think Again Turn Away” campaign and its ill-fated 2015 film *Welcome to Islamic State Land*—have been less than successful. Intent on what U.S. deputy defense secretary Robert Work called “dropping cyberbombs” (quoted in Sanger, 2016, p. A1), U.S. government officials thus repeatedly call on the media for assistance. In U.S. President Barack Obama’s view,

The media needs to help in this . . . how we report on this has to maintain perspective and not empower in any way these terrorist organizations or elevate them in ways that make it easier for them to recruit or make them stronger. (quoted in Borchers, 2015, para. 3)

Although Obama’s responses to Islamic State have fostered multiple critiques—a *New York Post* cover (see Figure 2) showed him blindfolded (“Islamic Terror,” 2015)—the need for media involvement has been ongoing.

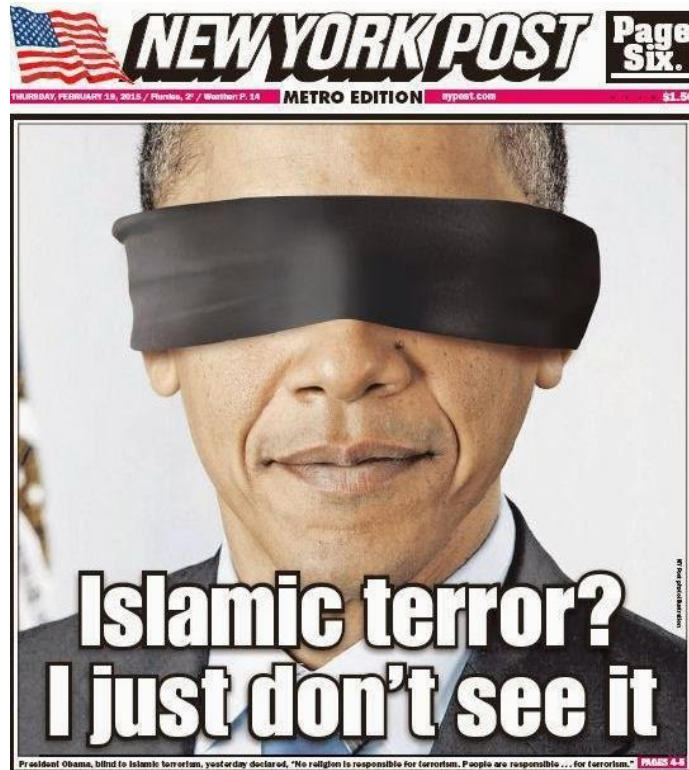


Figure 2. "Islamic Terror?" (2015).

It is thus no surprise that FBI director James Comey described Islamic State media units as "military targets" (Miller & Mekhennet, 2015), with the Cold War parallel cited repeatedly by both government officials and media outlets: U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry pronounced the Cold War a simple version of the fight against Islamic State (Taylor, 2015), whereas *Huffington Post* labeled the group "today's Cold War Moscow" after an attack on an Orlando nightclub ("Orlando Shows," 2016). Even the much-discussed March 2016 video reappearance of Islamic State captive British photographer John Cantlie was used to focus on the conflict's reduction to a media kiosk's bombing in Mosul, Iraq: Despite massive expenditures, he observed sarcastically, the United States "has begun targeting not tanks, not trucks, not even the mujahedeen but Islamic State media kiosks" ("British Journalist," 2016). As predicted by early discussions of netwar, media outlets thus remain central to the prosecution of activities between Islamic State and the United States.

Much like U.S. policy, U.S. coverage of Islamic State has been anything but consistent. As officials have gone back and forth in terms of how much coverage they deem effective and at which point it becomes more beneficial to Islamic State than to the free flow of information, journalists have largely swayed with their changing evaluations. Sometimes the media "followed the group's every move and, at times, breathlessly reported the group's growth and progress" (Fryer-Biggs, 2015, para. 5). Other times,

information was conspicuously absent, as the executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists noted:

In late 2013, when 30 journalists were missing in Syria, there was virtually no coverage of the problem, little public awareness that Islamic State fighters were actively searching for journalists and humanitarian workers to abduct, and less recognition of the rise of a group that has now emerged as a serious international security threat. (Simon, 2014, para. 2)

Along the way, news outlets entertained and then either embraced or rejected different kinds of news-making strategies—media blackouts, self-censoring or withholding certain information, developing alternative news sources, increasing a reliance on local stringers.

No definitive journalistic strategy exists across news outlets. Even when counterpropaganda efforts were announced by U.S. officials in early 2016, there was little media buy-in: *The Washington Post* described them as “more like shuffling the deck chairs rather than introducing new, proven strategies,” and a meeting with executives of new media outlets—YouTube, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft—produced the clear message that they did not share official U.S. government aims (Miller & DeYoung, 2016).

In part, the unevenness of U.S. media efforts in covering Islamic State has had to do with the fact that most U.S. journalists have had little to no access to territory under Islamic State’s control. A lack of ready availability to sources of information other than those supplied by Islamic State has meant the absence of a reliable, independent journalistic enterprise in the areas under the group’s control. As BBC correspondent Paul Wood (2016) noted, “in a civil war, information, like humanitarian aid, is rarely neutral. ISIS understood that. They did not want Western journalists in Syria” (para. 9). Thus, when Islamic State operatives regularly bypass conventional media outlets—“ISIS fighters,” said one news executive, “do not give interviews. They speak directly into the camera” (quoted in Simon & Libby, 2015, para. 9)—or engage in their own information distribution on social media, U.S. media outlets have revealed no clear strategy in dealing with them.

Nonetheless, knowledge remains the path to victory in this environment—what Google legal chief David Drummond called “the better way” (quoted in Flynn, 2016). Waging an information war extends from the most conventional news platforms—*The New York Times* and CNN—to the most marginal—VICE News, Vocativ, Mashable, and BuzzFeed. Even Anonymous declared its own war on Islamic State under the moniker OpISIS. Often the weight of attention provided by media outlets has been different from that displayed on other kinds of news stories: For instance, as legacy news outlets scaled back on Islamic State coverage due to budgetary and safety issues, “newer news organizations . . . [expanded] their mandate to fill the void” (Moses, 2014, para. 2).

Regardless of the fluctuations in coverage, the tone adopted by U.S. media outlets has been largely uniform. Headlines repeatedly underscore the value of information, assuring the U.S. public that

media outlets are providing what is needed. *The Atlantic* considered "What ISIS Really Wants" (Wood, 2015), whereas *Newsweek* asked "Can ISIS Take Down Washington?" (Stein, 2016) (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. "What ISIS Really Wants" (2015) and "Can ISIS Take Down Washington?" (2016).

With expected regularity, CNN, MSNBC, and Vox each separately claimed to offer "everything you need to know about" Islamic State (Beauchamp, 2015; Green & Thompson, 2015; Kohlmann, 2015), afterward providing updates on what was considered imperative information for the moment. The centrality of the Cold War parallel in this environment reached new heights in August 2016, when U.S. Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump announced his plan to fight Islamic State: As he called for political intelligence screening of would-be immigrants to the United States, CNN ran the headline, "For Trump, Cold War = ISIS" (Collinson, 2016) (see Figure 4).

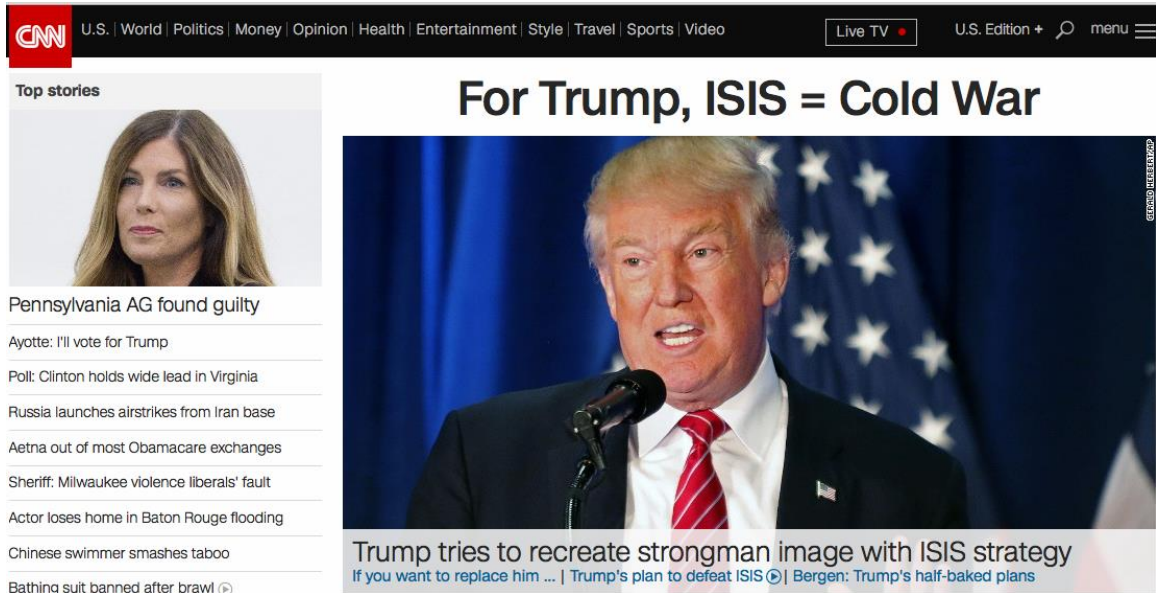


Figure 4. "For Trump, ISIS = Cold War" (Collinson, 2016).

Realistic relays have not necessarily been part of the picture of U.S. coverage. Instead, as evident during the Cold War, "the worse things get, the more we seem willing to describe things as we wish they might be rather than as they are" (Harling & Birke, 2015, para. 5). The speculation and imagination associated with unseen war thus prevail.

Examples abound: CNN featured a close-up of a Michigan Muslim woman in its video about Islamic State recruitment, although she was unconnected to the group (Rodriguez, 2016). The appellation of the "Iraqi army" referenced what was in effect "a worn-down collection of abused and often corrupt men who fled as the Islamic State advanced" (Harling & Birke, 2015, para. 5). A column in *The Washington Post* (see Figure 5) suggested that Halloween costumes be used to fight Islamic State (Moyer, 2014). NBC affixed a Defense Ministry video of an unnamed site's bombing to a story that it said was about fleeing Islamic State fighters (Bruton, 2016).

sections

The Washington Post

ISIS Halloween costumes are what we need to fight the Islamic State



By Justin Wm. Moyer October 23, 2014 [Follow @justinwmmoyer](#)

Justin Wm. Moyer is a reporter for The Washington Post.



Figure 5. "ISIS Halloween Costumes Are What We Need" (Moyer, 2014).

Even VICE News played to an unseen and largely imagined war when it screened video it had obtained from the head-cam of a dead IS fighter (*What It's Really Like*, 2016). Showing the fighters in disarray, the found footage was described as shot in northern Iraq before the fighter died while battling Kurdish troops in March 2016. VICE News advertised the video as "unlike IS propaganda" because it showed "chaos, panic and the fighters retreating."

The video is telling in that it was exemplary of how U.S. journalists typically respond to the group, using unseen war to their interpretive advantage. Although it portrayed only a small unit of Islamic State fighters, its depiction of disorganization was generalized into verbal accounts of the group's broader ineptitude. Filled with sporadic battle scenes and hesitant responses to them—in one scene, a fighter shouted at another to grab a rocket, but was met with hesitation and repeated questions—much of the video showed the fighters struggling to figure out how to use different kinds of weapons and fighting

among themselves as they clumsily fashioned a response to incoming fire. The fear, panic, and confusion that they exhibited thus generated a pronounced sense of disarray.

Although it remains unclear how much generalization is possible from what the footage showed, the absence of alternative footage enhanced its stand-in value for understanding a largely unseen war. Thus, as the video was disseminated and replayed, news outlets focused on the story of Islamic State's general ineptness. Detail targeted the sources of its ineffectuality by both comparing the film with the group's official relays and by evaluating the depicted conditions for battle:

Far from the videos produced by the Islamic State extolling the glory of their fighters, the headcam footage shows stress, confusion, and ultimately defeat. It also highlights the obvious lack of training and preparation on the part of ISIS. (Galbreath, 2016, para. 4)

The Washington Post carefully focused on the fighters' lack of experience and training, but nonetheless opined that "it is remarkable . . . how disorganized the small team is, given that the assault was probably planned" (Gibbons-Neff, 2016, para. 6). *Gawker* touted the film as more authentic than the Islamic State relays that "take the form of glamorous propaganda" (O'Connor, 2016, para. 2), whereas *Vocativ*, displaying a tweet calling the fighters "a hot mess," titled its discussion of the film "the one video ISIS doesn't want you to see" (Kavanaugh, 2016). After the fact, the video was widely lampooned on Twitter, where it was said to be the "true face" of Islamic State (Kavanaugh, 2016).

Across U.S. platforms, then, a single depiction of a set of bungled actions on the part of an Islamic State fighter unit was presumed representative of a war whose small battles had largely eclipsed depiction. Emblematic of how U.S. media outlets have used the suggestibility of unseen war to tweak coverage of Islamic State, their ensuing interpretations fit a larger story of the group's inevitable defeat.

Orientation of U.S. coverage to the idea that unseen war is real has thus rendered its coverage of Islamic State far more familiar than it might otherwise have been. As the *Columbia Journalism Review* noted almost two years ago, "[U.S.] media have focused on threats at home and abroad, while invoking the comforting myth of America's military prowess" and accommodating "official, often anonymous sources" and a "startling lack of evidence" (Colhoun, 2014, para. 2). No wonder that it titled its discussion "Why ISIS Coverage Sounds Familiar" (see Figure 6).

Behind the News CJR on the media

06:50 AM - November 14, 2014

Why ISIS coverage sounds familiar

The evolving narrative about a new terrorist threat is reminiscent of the Iraq War

By Damaris Colhoun Facebook Twitter Email More sharing Single Page



People watch smoke from an airstrike by the US-led coalition rising outside Kobani, Syria, from a hilltop on the outskirts of Suruc, at the Turkey-Syria border, on October 23. (AP Photo / Vadim Ghirda)

Figure 6. "Why ISIS Coverage Sounds Familiar" (Colhoun, 2014).

Islamic State Coverage

Although these parameters describe a media apparatus squarely positioned on the other side of the continuum from that of Islamic State, in fact Islamic State's coverage of itself follows interpretive cues similar to those found across U.S. media outlets. Like U.S. journalism, this media apparatus demonizes the other side, depends on media involvement to spread its message forcefully across enemy territory, and does not need to show war to instill belief and support for its prosecution. Run by a strong investment in "the phantasmagorical" (Harling & Birke, 2015), Islamic State's mediated activity is generated via a

huge media apparatus, which relies on tight production and loose dissemination (Miller & Mekhennet, 2015): "The war," said one Islamic State loyalist, "is not only in the field but also in the media" (quoted in Lynch & Weiss, 2016, para. 7), and the group's supporters are warned about keeping the "battlefield of Twitter and Facebook" energized and occupied (Shiloach, 2016).

Islamic State, said by one observer to "play the media like a violin" (Kaufman, 2015, para. 3), has built an apparatus intent on winning the information war. It operates from a number of interconnected media hubs—al-Furqan Media, al-Hayat Media, Ajnad Media, and al-I'tisam Media—as well as the news agency A'maq and provincial media offices, where efforts are coordinated, but so decentralized that provincial outlets are estimated to provide 78% of Islamic State's official releases (Zelin, 2015). Dependent on a vast, changing, and growing repertoire of outlets—Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, Kik, Soundcloud, and Ask.fm, among others—its multiplatform approach composes a "swarmcast" that utilizes resilience, speed, and agility in attaining netwar's objectives (Fisher, 2015): Members of the group change directions like a swarm of bees and are able to "swarm and disperse, penetrate and disrupt, as well as elude and evade" (Ronfeldt & Arquila, 2001, para. 2). Largely user curated and inspired by peer-to-peer sharing (Klausen, 2015), the network fosters continued content dissemination by repeatedly reconfiguring its dispersed suppliers and helping them reorganize operationally along networked lines.

Supplied in close to real time, Islamic State's content is plentiful. Conservative estimates put at least 3 videos, 15 photographic essays, and multilingual radio reports in production daily, as well as *nashids*—jihadist music sung a cappella—and feature films (Winter, 2015). Moreover, no less than 88% of its relays are visual in nature (Zelin, 2015).

By most accounts, this media activity is polished. Combining familiarity with Western cultural tropes, social media know-how, and a sophisticated mix of slick editing skills—involving cutaways, music, voice-overs, sound effects, and instant video retrieval—Islamic State provides what one observer early on called a mix of "new-media savvy and medieval savagery" (Sella, 2014). Relays that are "choreographed and carefully edited" assume the "innocently mediating, objective status of a news item" (Harmansah, 2015, p. 172), with little attention paid to their staged or theatrical dimensions. Entrenched in cultural references that resound in the West, Islamic State's media relays call to mind video games like *Call of Duty* as easily as they mimic films like *Natural Born Killers* (Dettmer, 2014; Kang, 2014). In *The Guardian's* view:

Virtually every frame has been treated. The color is so saturated, the combatants appear to glow with light. Explosions are lingered over in super slow motion. There are effects giving the feel of TV footage or old photographs. Transitions between clips are sheets of flame and blinding flashes. Graphics fly across the screen. Sonorous, auto-tuned chanting and cacophonous gunfire reverberate on the soundtrack. (Rose, 2014, para. 8)

Revealing "professional-caliber attention to lighting, sound and camera positioning," those behind Islamic State cameras are meticulously trained "in how to do filming. How to mix footage. How to get the right voice and tone in interviews" (Miller & Mekhennet, 2015, p. A1). One former cameraman recalled that an

execution he had filmed “wasn’t run by the executioner. It’s the media guy who says when they are ready” (quoted in Miller & Mekhennet, 2015, p. A1). Although some observers declared a “noticeable decline in quality” by 2016, in August of that year the Edinburgh International Television Festival nonetheless featured a debate on “what lessons can [Islamic State] teach broadcasters, brands and government?” (Burrell, 2015, para. 8).

Much like the media activity on the U.S. side, Islamic State’s apparatus depends on the imagination, in which orienting to what cannot be seen emblemizes what one analysis called the “the best way to compensate for real-world limits” (Harling & Birke, 2015, para. 1). An emphasis on unseen war thus permeates much of Islamic State’s output. Its relays show Islamic State fighters, but usually in masks or with faces pixilated from the images (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. “This Is Our Call of Duty” (Hall, 2014).

Its glossy magazine *Dabiq* shows sweeping battlefield victories, often more aspired to than real: The magazine’s fifth issue, “Remaining and Expanding” (2014), detailed Islamic State’s plan for expansion across the Arabian Peninsula rather than the chaos of retreating fighters shown with VICE News. Often such relays are connected to eschatological scenes of redemption, embodied by a Twitter app titled, “Dawn of Glad Tidings.” *Dabiq*’s second issue, for example, focused on “The Flood” (2014) of the biblical Old Testament, proclaiming Islamic State as the “ark” while predicting the end of civilization (see Figure 8).



Figure 8. "Remaining and Expanding" (2014) and "The Flood" (2014).

Media relays confirm that "life is good in the Islamic State's caliphate: flowers are blooming, industry is booming, and the conquest of Rome is (still) looming" (Winter, 2016, para. 3). Audiences are told of a conquering and united Islam, that in one view "works all the better the less versed in Islamic culture [the] audience actually is" (Harling & Birke, 2015, para. 3). Relays thus skirt the facts that do not fit the message, an omission in keeping with memory work, but dependent on accepting that one does not need to see war to admit its occurrence.

One example of unseen war can be found in *Flames of War*, the first full-length documentary produced by Islamic State in 2014 to connect itself to the historic Muslim caliphate. Like much of Islamic State's media output, the 55-minute film portrays the group as an agent of change by splicing together images of reality and fantasy, rational and irrational, unusual and commonplace—through visual intercuts using slow motion, skilled editing, high-quality images, and music—at the heart of a story about military conquest, terror, and moral policing. Juxtaposing old press conference footage of U.S. presidents George Bush and Barack Obama with accusations of the U.S. government's deceitful nature, the film centers on Islamic State's rise within Syria. Featuring idyllic desert scenes, depictions of victorious battles, and close-ups of fighters using various kinds of weapons, *Flames of War* ends with a mass execution of Syrian soldiers in President Bashar al-Assad's army.

The film's 52-second trailer, widely distributed in advance of the film, highlighted its central themes (Al Hayat Media Center, 2014). The trailer opens to U.S. troops under attack by Islamic State, shows scenes of flames engulfing President Obama and the White House, and closes with the words "Flames of War: Fighting Has Just Begun," followed by the phrase "Coming Soon."

In much the same way that U.S. media outlets used VICE News's display of inept behavior to highlight Islamic State's general weakness, those tracking Islamic State's media apparatus as a sign of its

growing authority acknowledged the film's capacity to portend the group's power. Its message to followers, opined one Associated Press reporter, was that they "can wage holy war, exact revenge on those seen as oppressing Muslims and help build a just society based on divine law" (Batrawy, 2014, para. 21). *Al Jazeera* saw the film as essentially a call to war with the United States (Al-Gharbi, 2014). One academic analysis argued that the film's main purpose was "to recruit supporters to the ISIS cause by portraying the group in a positive light—its glorious mission, military successes and the (purported) good it has done for the people of Iraq and Syria" (Allendorfer & Herring, 2015, para. 27).

Not surprisingly, U.S. media outlets belittled *Flames of War*: VICE News called it "yet another push of propaganda" (Ruble, 2014, para.1), and the *New York Daily News* said it portrayed "its quest for jihad as a blockbuster action film . . . more like a Hollywood movie trailer than terrorist intimidation" (Wagner, 2014, para. 2). One reporter scoffed at its presumed high quality, noting a "disquieting naivete in the Western response . . . [reflecting] amazement and surprise that the group could put out video" (Lennard, 2014, para. 7). Left undepicted, and largely undiscussed, were multiple actions and their effects that did not fit the view Islamic State wanted to promote of itself in the film and were not mentioned by viewers. And yet the unseen dimensions of Islamic State's war hovered in the background, silent cues complicating interpretations of what was shown.

Paradoxically, Islamic State's reliance on unseen war in its media relays involves a partial reliance on spectacle. Its orientation to "propaganda of the deed" (Bolt, 2012), used to counter what Islamic State calls the West's "deceptive media halo" (Naji, 2004/2006, p. 17), fosters an engagement in acts of culture jamming designed to expose the limited power of Western media (DeBord, 1967/1994). Becoming the platform through which the group can "proclaim and reinforce the rules it lives by" (Feffer, 2015, para. 23), this focus on spectacle allows Islamic State to "stay on the front page and at the top of a social media stream" (Logue, 2015, para. 15). Thus, it choreographs spectacle to "allure sympathizers and patrons, recruit further fanatics, humiliate local communities while annihilating their sense of heritage, and offend the humanitarian West" (Harmansah, 2015, p. 175). Accomplished via the mediated staging of brutal events, displays like bulldozing archeological sites and beheadings are examples of "about to die" moments that mimic the Western media's ambivalence about the practice (Zelizer, 2010, 2016b). These displays are considered an integral part of the group's mobilizing and revolutionary efforts.

Much of Islamic State's mediated activity, albeit stylized, is not theatrical, violent, or spectacular. Brutal violence, according to a study by Winter (2015), is estimated to compose only 2% of its mediated relays (Coker & Flynn, 2015). Rather, Islamic State wants to promote itself as a functioning state and "to show normalcy within the territory it controls" (Zelin, 2015), with 52% of its relays focusing on quality-of-life issues (Coker & Flynn, 2015). Such nonviolent, nonspectacular images, often "left wholly ignored" by Western media, engage in the "regular depiction of things like markets, service provision and agriculture" (Winter, 2015, p. 32). Relays showing Islamic State fighters embracing kittens or eating candy bars "aim to communicate the message that, while strictly Islamic, ISIS stands for promoting the welfare of people, not murdering them" (Farwell, 2014, p. 50). Thus, *Dabiq* (see Figure 9) regularly treats audiences to images of individuals receiving health care, nurturing children, building infrastructures and engaging in a productive commercial life—offering what one observer labeled a "perfectly functioning society where Muslims live happily in accordance with their Islamic principles" (Williams, 2016, para. 14).

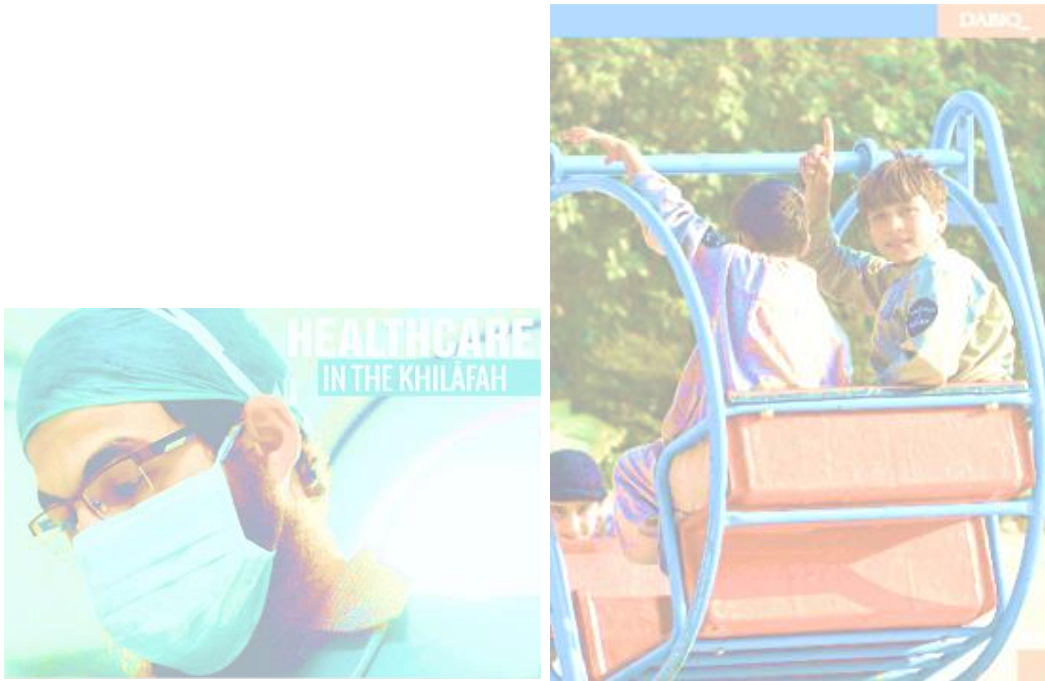


Figure 9. "They Plot and Allah Plots" (2015).

At the same time, Islamic State's off-line media activity is also extensive. Radio and the press remain key dimensions of its apparatus. One formerly annual newsletter—*al-Naba'*—is now issued weekly, whereas al-Bayan Radio broadcasts 24/7, offering news bulletins, history lessons, on-air fatwas, and call-in medical clinics from central Libya to eastern Iraq. Media kiosks double as open-air cinemas and publishing houses for materials to be screened or shared on USB sticks. Described at length by analyst Charlie Winter (2016), this

offline media strategy has, for a long time, been almost totally obscured by the world's fixation on its online equivalent . . . [allowing] Islamic State to extend its reach, infiltrate its message into remote regions with no online infrastructure, and sustain a constant information presence in population centers. (Winter, 2016, paras. 5, 7)

Islamic State's use of spectacle thus comprises a message used for particular audiences, but one that accounts for only a small part of the textured Islamic State media environment. Called a "red herring," the focus on brutal spectacle has "fatally derailed mainstream understanding of the organization and its appeal" (Winter, 2015, p. 7).

When Absence Equals Excess

Against this background, the notion of unseen war helps explain more fully how Islamic State relays work. Scholars as wide ranging as Jakobson (1960) and Barthes (1977) have contended that the absence of a phenomenon plays the same role as its excess, suggesting that, from a structural perspective, war's invisibility functions much like its hypervisibility. Both offset attention to the more textured activity unfolding in the middle.

Not only does absencing war's fuller depiction enforce a tighter and more controlled public response; it also fosters imaginative and erroneous ways of thinking about ensuing conflict. As *The Atlantic* noted in discussing what it called Islamic State's "weaponization" of journalism:

Nuance is everything. . . . Its terrorism is not going anywhere. If the response to it continues to be characterized by hype and inflammatory ignorance, we are only encouraging [its] efforts. (Winter & Ingram, 2016, para. 15)

Unseen war thus achieves its impact in predictable and routinized ways. Although current engagement between the United States and Islamic State in many ways follows the tenets of netwar, the dynamic link between what is and is not shown suggests that entrenched parameters of invisibility play a vital role in war's prosecution.

Evidence surfaces across Islamic State activity. First, as with all authoritarian regimes, Islamic State strategically leaves many aspects of its activity invisible. Where it can, it censors information, controls the Internet, bans satellite dishes, and cuts off competing radio stations (Winter, 2016). "Acutely aware of the power of information," noted one BBC correspondent, Islamic State goes "to great lengths to control it" (Wood, 2016, para. 36). In other words, in areas under its control, it operates an information monopoly that makes—and keeps—unseen much about the war that is unfolding.

Second, Islamic State keeps afloat viable support narratives for those under its rule. Its narrative promotes a tale of victory, state building, and redemption (Stern & Berger, 2015). Largely unremarked in current media discussions has been the vast number of Arabic-language videos with no translation, whose material offsets the bias created by focusing on the small number of English-language relays—less than 7% of all media output (Zelin, 2015). In the larger corpus of Arabic-language videos, a multidimensional play to an alternative way of life remains central to the media apparatus, with most relays focused on the idealized restoration of normal life. Bolstered by references to piety, benevolence, belonging, education, health care, social welfare, and a transformative future, in such a landscape utopianism is "arguably the broadest and most important theme" (Winter, 2015, p. 28). All other narratives cumulatively support it as "the *only* constant" (Winter, 2016), rendering even the depiction of seemingly banal activities like fishing or sheep cleaning as singularly oriented to utopian living.

Third, Islamic State uses unseen war to stoke panic. The media act as a "force multiplier to make it appear active in many locations even though most of its activities are in Iraq and Syria" (Zelin, 2015, para. 2). Although Islamic State does "not attempt to cover up war crimes but to trumpet them" (Wood,

2016, para. 37), it does so in strategic ways. Two recent examples bear this out: After the Brussels attacks in March 2016, Islamic State supporters tweeted fictitiously of several bombs placed at the European Commission (Flynn, 2016). Less effective was a social media campaign in the summer of 2016 that accidentally revealed the locations of Islamic State social media posters in various European cities (Frenkel, 2016).

Each of these strategies should be very familiar to those in step with U.S. journalism, for they are part of the way that Cold War mindedness drives U.S. news. But what is peculiar here is its perseverance as the deep memory for mediating Islamic State's own media activity. Although Cold War mindedness is not the only deep structure undergirding its media apparatus, Islamic State mimics the cues by which the global flow of news, largely led by U.S. media, tends to unfold. This suggests that the minds behind Islamic State's media apparatus are not as far from the longstanding platforms of the U.S. media landscape as assumed.

Keeping war unseen through extensive media activity is a paradox, but a telling one. Although *The Washington Post* wrote not long ago that "in its propaganda war against ISIS, the U.S. tried to play by the enemy's rules" (Miller & Higham, 2015), this analysis suggests the opposite: Islamic State is playing at least in part by U.S. media rules, following a mnemonic pattern set in place long ago. In this regard, it exhibits not only new media savvy but also old media logics. Significantly, these old media logics are of U.S. origin. A U.S. mnemonic structure thus partly runs the news not only about Islamic State but also by Islamic State.

Conclusion

How does this discussion enhance an understanding of collective memory in the news? The coverage of and by Islamic State and its powerful consonance with Cold War mindedness suggest multiple mnemonic conventions: Memory lurks in unusual places, it emerges when least expected, and it creates clusters of disparate events, even when doing so fosters troubling comparisons. This suggests that the real power of journalism, particularly in crisis, may be in connecting events backward, not forward.

At stake here are the depths to which journalism's memory work extends in shaping contemporary engagement with the world. In ways that are deeply invisible, collective memory gives form to news events and issues that a priori settles what is worth knowing and in which way. There is a need to more fully recognize its contours, understand its relevance, and check its development when its cues feel awry.

Soren Kierkegaard (1843/1997) wrote long ago that living forward depends on understanding backward. That can be the case only when one recognizes how much and how often our looks backward block our understanding of what occurs in the here and now.

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