Project Summary: Airwars and the Production of Authority in Conflict Monitoring

A/Professor Heather Ford (UTS) & A/Professor Michael Richardson (UNSW)

This study explores how Airwars collects and presents data related to civilian harm caused primarily by airstrikes, and how this data contributes to the construction of authoritative narratives in the context of armed conflicts. The research analyses the methods used by Airwars to collect data, which includes monitoring social media, collaborating with local sources, and engaging with military and government entities. It highlights the challenges faced by Airwars in verifying information and distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources, exploring the implications of these challenges on the credibility and legitimacy of the data produced. Overall, the study shows how Airwars navigates the complexities of conflict monitoring to produce accounts that are authoritative because they are open to contestation and revision. The principles of transparency and openness to further iteration are potent signals of authority in the digital era, signals that Airwars is able to commandeer in order to assert its claims to knowledge about civilian harm events.

Research Methods

This study combines digital ethnographic methods with analytical techniques and concepts from media and cultural studies. Eight in-depth, semi-structured conversations were carried out over Zoom with key staff across various roles: researchers, assessors, geolocators, advocacy specialists and managers. We also conducted a close reading of organisational documentation, such as incident reports, manuals, policies and reporting standards. Interview data and documentation were thematically coded using an iterative process of identifying emerging themes and topics and establishing relationships between them. The study draws on media and communication studies concepts, particularly that of 'data witnessing,' developed by the media studies researcher Dr Jonathan Gray (UCL) to describe how data can produce testimony to political violence.

Key Findings

Our findings show that the ways in which Airwars frames witnessing accounts is central to its authority. Airwars' frames operate at multiple scales and contain multiple perspectives. This high level framing powers their authority. Airwars garners authority by enclosing seemingly contradictory views within a single frame, but without foreclosing diverse viewpoints, incomplete evidence and contradictory evidence. It insists on keeping every investigation open. This openness means that authority, almost paradoxically, depends on its own refusal to claim definitive veracity: truth is always partial, contingent and able to be contested.

By refusing to 'close' its investigations, Airwars always remains 'open' to revision of its findings, a stance which helps it claim legitimacy and 'epistemic authority' – the authority to make accepted knowledge. Rather than weaken its authority, this approach of 'framing' witnessing actually strengthens the evidence and assessments that Airwars publishes in its databases. By combining its open-ended methodology with an inclusion of multiple perspectives, the use of internal and sectoral data standards, spatially distributed resources and a publicly available methodology, our study shows that Airwars draws this epistemic authority from the way it frames potential civilian harm events to allow for competing narratives, ambivalent evidence, and disputed facts.

Experts, institutions, networks. Airwars relies on in-house expertise to curate evidence from the multiple stakeholders included in its witnessing frame.

- Airwars' small team is divided into personnel who engage with a spectrum of casualty reporting practices: researchers, assessors, geolocators, advocacy personnel, and management. Both local expertise and expertise that arises through a tight knit community of practice are critical to Airwars' operation.
- Airwars demonstrates the importance of paid, professional intermediaries in the representation of conflict events and the advocacy necessary to ensure reparation or justice.
- Airwars also depends upon the expertise of allied organisations within its networks, which include other open-source conflict monitors and news organisations. It often includes information or findings from these sources in its reports.

Data standards. Airwars presents witness accounts according to internal and sectoral data standards that expand the witnessing frame further and lend authority to individual accounts.

- Sectoral standards for casualty and conflict monitoring include "Standards for Casualty Reporting" from "Every Casualty Counts" (ECC) that establishes a baseline for the practice of casualty recording.
- Internal standards include structured information required to complete an assessment for information collection, verification, retention and review. e.g. geolocation standards for accuracy and exactitude using visual evidence.

Spatially distributed resources. Airwars' work predominantly uses digital platforms: 1) as sources of information, 2) as compositional tools for the construction of reports and 3) as disseminators. This counteracts difficulties of information collection, but also distributes the witnessing frame across geographic, material and institutional contexts.

- For researchers, Twitter, Facebook, and local news sources are primary collection sites, with information identified, collated, and catalogued manually. Once a strike is identified, more tailored searching can be undertaken, including via Google. Geolocators primarily use a suite of freely available GIS platforms, as well as well-known techniques such as reverse image search for verification.
- For the assessors that analyse collated research material, the Airwars backend database is also a critical platform because it structures the required information such as casualty estimates, degree of certainty and so on.
- While effective, this manual approach is labour intensive and indicative of the limitations of digital platforms. This reliance on third-party platforms and on the walled gardens of social media creates both limitations and risks for Airwars. Navigating those limitations and shifts in their nature is one of the key tasks of maintaining the effectiveness of Airwars.

Techniques: the Airwars methodology. Airwars applies an established, publicly available methodology to its research and assessment of civilian harm events. It enables Airwars to demonstrate rigour in its research and assessment and commit to the potential for its own assessments to change. This methodology:

- Makes the local global, prioritising the experiences, voices and knowledge of those proximate to or directly injured or affected by civilian harm events.
- Supports analysis using an 'all source' approach, capturing digital representations of events from multiple perspectives, languages, locations and media.
- Maintains open-ended open-ended assessments, capturing all available information about the event but with determinations always open to re-evaluation when/if more information becomes available.

Full findings and analysis can be found in the peer-reviewed article Ford, H and Richardson, M (2023) "Framing Data Witnessing: Airwars and the Production of Authority in Conflict Monitoring." Media, Culture & Society, 45:3. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/01634437221147631