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ARTICLE

The Abu Ghraib torture photographs

News frames, visual culture, and the power of images

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a close analysis of how the Abu Ghraib photographs originally were perceived and framed in the American news media, public debate, and in various cultural contexts, this article addresses the question of how iconic news media images exercise power in the shaping of news, politics, and public opinion. It specifically takes issue with the tendency among prominent communication scholars to assume that visuals mainly function to support dominant news frames and elite political discourse with little or no potential for independent influence on audiences. The key conclusion of the article is that the Abu Ghraib photographs were not in any simple way 'spoken for' or tamed by the dominant news frames, but quite the opposite. The photographs have themselves come to function as a critical prism through which elite and popular views on US foreign policy are refracted, in the sense that the heretofore banned sight of American troops in the role of sadistic torturers has become an integral part of our understanding of the Bush administration's 'war on terror'. The impact of these photographs is not least suggested by their proliferation in the wider culture, where they, through various creative and counter-framing practices, often have been transformed into sites of protest and opposition to the very deeds they represent.

KEY WORDS ▪ Iraq war ▪ news frames ▪ photojournalism ▪ war photography ▪ public memory

Introduction

Few photographs in recent years have been deemed so 'shocking' and 'compelling' as the amateur snapshots of US soldiers torturing Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison west of Baghdad. They instantly rose to iconic status after being broadcast by *CBS 60 Minutes II* at the end of April 2004, and came to the forefront of political debate both inside and outside the United States.

The Abu Ghraib case has evoked many unsubstantiated statements about the meaning and impact of the photographs at the center of the scandal.

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Assumptions about the autonomous efficacy of the images have surfaced frequently in public commentary, as has belief in their transparency, status as uncontestable evidence and special ability to set the agenda for both news reporting and policy-making.[1] The sudden appearance of the photographs of torture at Abu Ghraib, the argument goes, helped destroy the dominant Iraq war narrative of American liberation and moral superiority, and prompted public attention to the occupational power's making of a quagmire in post-war Iraq. However, in contrast to what popular wisdom holds as true, most communication scholars are quite skeptical about claims of the powerful impact of news media images, arguing instead that the context and narrative framing of journalistic images are more influential than the pictures themselves (Griffin, 2004, 2005; Perlmutter, 1998; Zelizer, 1998, 2004). And it is true that the relevance, representativeness, and the causes of the prisoner abuse images were far from obvious when the Abu Ghraib story broke. Rather, a political war erupted in the United States over how to 'frame' the photographs, and over how far-reaching the prisoner abuse scandal was going to be. The Abu Ghraib case thus offers an unusually fruitful opportunity to explore the relationship between images, 'news frames' (Entman, 1993, 2004) and political and cultural impact.

Drawing on a close analysis of how the Abu Ghraib photographs originally were perceived and framed in the American news media, in public debate, and in various cultural contexts, this article addresses the question of how news media images exert power in the shaping of news, politics, and public opinion. Specifically, I take issue with the scholarly tendency to foreclose any inquiry into the workings of news media images with presuppositions that such images mainly play the passive role of illustrations to dominant news frames and official political discourse, with little or no potential for independent influence on members of the audience.

As Mitchell (1986: 3) points out, it is hard to write criticism without lapsing into some version of 'the rhetoric of iconoclasm', which presupposes that verbal discourse precedes, dominates, and resists visual representation. This article argues instead that the relationship between visuals and news narratives is often a 'high-tension' one. Images which contradict or disrupt a dominant discursive frame might have a considerable impact, if not directly on politics and policy-making, then more so on popular imagination and historical consciousness. Iconic news media images are notoriously migratory, often being instantly appropriated and re-circulated in the wider culture. The Abu Ghraib photographs are a case in point. They have had worldwide cultural repercussions, and continue to be 'remediated' (Bolter and Grusin, 1999)[2] and re-circulated in posters, murals, ads, comics, art, and on popular websites.

The importance of this inquiry lies in the fact that it addresses questions not only of how news images function within the narrow frames of a particular

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paper or magazine, and within elite political discourse, but in culture at large. Despite the dominance of image flows and visual technologies in contemporary media environment, theory and research into visual culture has remained marginal to the field of media and communication study (Becker, 2004). However, the rapidly expanding – and hotly debated (Bal, 2003; Elkins, 2003; Jay, 2002; Mitchell, 2002) – field of visual culture studies offers perspectives that fruitfully address the question of how media images and their viewers make meaning, by interrogating visuals that transgress the boundaries of media (and media studies) and asking how meaning is produced by and through these visuals when they circulate in and across specific cultures (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2003a, 2003b; Becker, 2002; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001; Zelizer, 2001).

The key question is what happens to the meaning and function of images when members of the public 'reclaim' them from the news media flow – and from the ways in which they are framed by the decision elites – and put them to use in popular or high art contexts. How do the 'preferred meanings' imposed on the Abu Ghraib photographs by the discourse elites compare to the meaning-making practices of wider audiences? In conclusion, I argue that we can gain new insights into the role and limitations of so-called 'dominant' news frames by exploring the wider cultural repercussions of media images, and the ways in which viewers actually use and make sense of them.

The 'rhetoric of iconoclasm'

The journalistic institution is founded on a deep-seated ambivalence toward images (Becker, 2003[1992]; Bickett and Packer, 2004; Zelizer, 1998). On the one hand, because of their perceived status as unmediated 'windows' on the world, photographs have served to guarantee the objectivity and truth-value of news reporting. On the other hand, defined as a 'purely visual' medium, photographs have been assigned to the non-reflective realm of simplistic sensations, perceived as a threat to the journalistic news institution with its roots in the rationalist Enlightenment. Hence, news images have traditionally been regarded as subjugated illustrations, incapable of telling stories or articulating complex ideas, except by parasitical dependence on verbal reporting.

The journalistic privileging of language as standing for all higher cognitive activity is symptomatic of the 'rhetoric of iconoclasm' that pervades western criticism (Mitchell, 1986). Stigmatized by notions such as deception, irrationality, vulgarity, and empty voyeurism, images in western culture continue to retain the low cognitive and moral status initially accorded them by Plato (cf. Jay, 1993; Stafford, 1996). As shown by Mitchell (1986), the contempt of the image is deeply bound up with a fear of the image as a site of a special

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power (cf. Freedberg, 1989; Morgan, 2005). This anxiety has resurfaced with a vengeance in response to the intensified image flows in the contemporary media landscape. Debates have often bordered on moral panics over, on the one hand, the reality-effect of atrocity images, threatening to traumatize the public and alter the course of state policy – the so called 'CNN effect'[3] – or, on the other hand, over the perceived 'compassion fatigue' syndrome, presuming that the ubiquity of atrocity images has numbed our senses and created a new condition of public indifference in the face of the suffering of others (Campbell, 2003; Moeller, 1999; Taylor, 1998; Zelizer, 1998).

The iconoclastic critique of the unreal, seductive, and dangerous image is also a prominent trope in much theorizing on photography (Andén-Papadopoulos, 1994). Leading writers such as Benjamin (1979[1931]), Sontag (1977), Barthes (1981), Berger (1980) and Flusser (1988) all accuse the documentary photograph of masking political and historical reality in favor of a detached sentimentalism.[4] In his early work, Barthes (1977[1964]) further set the stage for the logocentrism that has informed many subsequent attempts at defining image/text relations on the newspaper page (cf. Hall, 1973; Hard af Segerstad, 1974). With the concept of 'anchorage', Barthes claimed to have identified the most common form of relation between still image and text, presupposing that the text has the repressive power to 'fix' the meaning of the image. Even if critics have refuted Barthes' 'linguistic imperialism' (Mitchell, 1986: 56), stressing instead the image's potential to influence and even overthrow the linguistic message (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2000; Hjarvard, 1995; Larsen, 1988; Mitchell, 1994), it seems that the perception of images as relatively powerless, mute, and inferior kinds of signs still lingers within the field of media and communication studies (cf. Becker, 2004).

The power of images

Prominent communication scholars advocate a strong anti-thesis to the popular assumptions about news media images as 'all-powerful forces', arguing instead that photographs in the press typically are constructed as generic symbols that serve to support dominant news discourses. Griffin, for instance, maintains that pictures in the press predominantly function as 'simple thematic cues' (2004: 384) and 'uncomplicated symbolic markers' that 'prime and reinforce prevailing news narrative' rather than add 'specific detail or informational substance' (2004: 399). Zelizer likewise argues that wartime journalism gravitates toward images that are 'more schematic than detailed, conventionalized, and simplified' (2004: 115). In her view, aesthetic appeal and familiarity are privileged over photography's documentary potential, 'thereby undermining the

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provision of newsworthy and critically important information' (2004: 15). Visuals are used as 'pegs' (2004: 115) not to particular events but to larger stories that reflect and reinforce the myth of war as an expression of patriotism and prowess. Perlmutter (1998) further settles accounts with the popular claim that iconic news photographs cause widespread public outrage and drive American foreign policy. He argues that the so-called 'icons of outrage' are thoroughly absorbed in, and largely produced by, dominant news and elite discourse, and usually fail to engender any deepened public concern.

There is clearly some truth to the claim that the bulk of visual war coverage is formulaic, and tends to function as generic illustration to prevailing journalistic frames. Still, to stop short of exploring the wartime function of pictures in the press by largely defining them as subordinated 'markers', 'pegs' or 'cues' to news narratives is unsatisfying in many ways. First and foremost, we need to keep in mind the limitations of content analysis when it comes to assessing the meaning and impact of visuals in the news. Attempts to classify photographs on the basis of their 'manifest' content tend to inherently construct their object of study as simple and poor in information. Content analysis by definition emphasizes content at the expense of context, and turns a blind eye to the fact that the photograph is a sign with its own highly complex means of signifying. Also, as Brothers (1997: 29) points out, methods of quantification 'are insensitive to visual conventions that can invest a single image with considerable power' while the category of pictures with the largest frequence may make little impact. The greater part of the information photographs carry resides not within their manifest contents, but in *the way* they communicate. It lies in the specific way they reinforce and transgress both photographic conventions (framing, gaze, lighting, context, camera position) and social conventions (visual codes of dress, style, architecture, objects, body language etc) employed in the 'lived' world (Lister and Wells, 2001).[5]

Even if photographs can be notoriously ambiguous and evasive, one thing a critical inquiry into news framing needs to note is that photographs to a certain extent 'speak' a language of their own. They are complexly coded cultural artifacts that to some extent 'place' us in specific viewing positions and convince us to see matters in a certain way (Lister and Wells, 2001: 83).We consequently need to note the possibility of resistance of the visual image to the dominant news narrative, and the potential of certain persistent images to invade and even help reframe that narrative.

The fact is that the photographic and textual messages in wartime journalism are often dissonant or contradictory to each other. An illuminating example can be drawn from the Vietnam war. Here, an attempt by *Look Magazine*'s editors to speak self-critically about America needing to settle with its role and reputation as imperialistic superpower was accompanied by an image showing a

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dead North Vietnamese soldier lying in dirt and debris (Moeller, 1989: 402). The image resurrected Orientalist tropes of the 'other's' life being worthless; a trophy shot that seriously undermined the reconciliatory rhetoric of the text. Another prominent example can be drawn from the coverage in the Swedish press of the fall of Baghdad in April 2003, with the climactic toppling of the Saddam statue (Andén-Papadopoulos, 2005). The bronze tyrant biting the dust was a perfect 'Kodak moment', seemingly justifying the war with jubilant Iraqi people welcoming the US troops as 'liberators'. Swedish newspapers typically carried verbal and visual interpretations of this event that were antagonistic to each other. The photographs showed Iraqis kissing, embracing, and bringing flowers to the US and British troops, and zoomed in on 'crowds' rejoicing at the sight of the symbolic toppling of the former dictator. In contrast, the accompanying texts were careful to nuance and interrogate the self-congratulatory message of unanimous military and moral victory for the coalition forces.

In cases like these, the spectacle of compelling visual images conveying views that the accompanying texts denounce as false, misleading or 'politically incorrect', arguably sends confusing signals to audience members. Rather than presupposing that the visuals are inessential features spoken for by the news narrative, we need to pay close attention to the dialectic of exchange and resistance between verbal and visual news discourse. Moreover, any theory or model of the political role of news images must account for the potential of particularly resonant photographs to 'speak louder' than the bulk of visual coverage, and to quickly shift from more marginal positions in the news to cultural centrality and canonicity. In this regard, Griffin (1999) and Zelizer (1998, 1999, 2002) provide important insights into how particular news photographs become celebrated cultural symbols, which reflect and reinforce national mythologies (cf. Taylor, 1991).

Perlmutter's (1998) exploration of the interplay between photojournalism and foreign policy is also significant, since he focuses precisely on iconic news images and their political repercussions. However, the weight of Perlmutter's 'no effect' argument is limited in the sense that he mainly focuses on how such images function within a narrowly defined elite political circuit, and whether they have any direct and categorical impact on people's attitudes towards war. He thus aligns himself with traditional research on the media and public opinion, which has largely disqualified any theory of the news that posits strong effects on members of the audience. Hallin points out that this might be a somewhat misleading conclusion since public opinion surveys 'reveal relatively little about what war means to members of the mass public' (1997: 215). Hallin and Gitlin (1994) further make the case that from the point of view of cultural analysis we have explained little regarding opinion-formation processes until we know how audiences actually ascribe meaning to

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information about war in their everyday lives. They conclude that 'the most important effect of the media's myth-making is probably the long-term, not the short-term, effect – its effect on our general cultural understanding of war' (1994: 161). Hence, even if it is hard to find evidence that iconic news photographs have any immediate political or policy effects, we should not rule out that they might have long-term repercussions for the shaping of public consciousness and national memory (cf. Griffin, 1999; Sturken, 1997; Zelizer, 1998). Such images may evoke a wide range of responses besides the 'outrage' that Perlmutter looks for, and they might contribute to a gradual alteration of attitudes over time even if they do not cause people to categorically shift their position for or against a given policy.

Rather than yielding to iconoclastic readings of news photographs as supplements to texts, lacking in both substance and independent impact, we need to keep the relation of visual image to verbal narrative open, allowing for it to be seen as a dialectical field of forces. Above all, we need to account for the rapid cultural dissemination and lingering resonance of striking visuals in the news. Hence, even if the Abu Ghraib photographs were quickly removed from the public agenda, as Griffin (2005) among others has argued, it is premature to therefore assume that they 'seem to have faded into the background of history' and that their 'impact seems to have quickly waned' (Griffin, 2005: 9). The photographs have continued to circulate in the wider culture and, by force of their graphic concreteness, to conjure the sight of US troops in the role of sadistic torturers as a central point of reference in the ongoing debate on the Bush administration's 'war on terror'.[6]

CBS 60 Minutes II

The cascade model developed by Robert M. Entman (2004) attempts to explain how and why some frames activate and spread from the administration to the news media and to the public.[7] The model specifically underlines that early news coverage of an event is most important because the frame imposed from the start tends to guide responses to all future reports (2004: 7). It is thus of particular interest to examine what specific meanings were ascribed to the Abu Ghraib photographs when they first entered the public domain as published and 'framed' news media items.[8]

I have analyzed how the most important framing functions were performed by the two journalistic institutions that originally broke the Abu Ghraib story, *CBS 60 Minutes II* and *The New Yorker* magazine.[9] I have further examined how these two competing journalistic reports were played out in the public debate that followed. An often stated argument holds that these two reports played

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well together in uncovering the Abu Ghraib scandal, presuming that 'Hersh provided the words and CBS provided the pictures, creating a complete story' (Griffin, 2005: 6). This presumption, however, obscures the fact that the reports' frames of interpretation differ significantly from each other.

CBS's segment *Court Martial in Iraq*, broadcast on 28 April 2004, indicates how the Abu Ghraib scandal was originally framed and filtered into the American popular consciousness by the mainstream news media. My analysis shows that it largely echoed the Bush administration's key argument, framing the photographed torture as the work of a few undisciplined individuals. The broadcast gives uncontested prominence to the voice of General Mark Kimmitt, deputy director of Coalition Operations in Iraq. General Kimmitt appears seven times throughout the whole segment, promoting the view that the abuse of Iraqi prisoners was about misconduct by a small group of morally corrupt individuals.

While the Iraqi detainees paraded in the pictures remain anonymous in the CBS show, human interest value is clearly attached to one of the American soldiers charged with mistreating Iraqi prisoners, Army Reserve Staff Sergeant Chip Frederick. He too appears seven times in the segment, defending his actions as having been ordered by military intelligence officers. The impression given is that Sergeant Frederick is decent at core, dedicated to serving his country, and led to believe that he was doing just that by getting rough with the Iraqi detainees. He is worthy of our sympathy for being the victim of brutal circumstances, and, after all, for being guided by patriotic, not racist or inhuman, principles.

The disturbing content and political implications of the abuse photographs were thus played down when they originally entered the social domain via the popular news program *CBS 60 Minutes II*. The show largely promoted the Bush administration's 'few bad apples' frame. At the same time, the scapegoating of the charged reservist soldiers was to some degree counter-checked by the apologetic framing of the American soldiers posing in the photographs. The overall message of the CBS segment read that the prisoner abuse could be explained by management failures, not policy failures. The critical searchlight was averted from any scrutinizing of the very top of the American military and political establishment. Hence, the remedy suggested to the exposed problem of prisoner torture was not policy change, but simply to reinforce military discipline.

Seymor M. Hersh and the chain of command

Unlike the CBS show, the veteran investigative reporter Hersh aimed his critical searchlight at the very top of the chain of command (2004a, 2004b, 2004c). He

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offered important new details and context that helped explain the causes of the scandal, all of which suggested that it was policies set by the decision elites in Washington that gave rise to the violations at Abu Ghraib and at other US operated prison camps in Iraq, Afghanistan and at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.[10] Also in contrast to the CBS show, Hersh did address the key question as to why the American soldiers photographed themselves in the act of violating their victims. The question is critical since it inevitably evokes the possibility, even probability, of an organized military intelligence tactic using photography as an integral part of torture – or 'psychological operations' as the military calls it. Hersh put forth testimony that this was indeed the case. He suggested that the US soldiers used the camera strategically as a weapon to humiliate the Iraqi inmates and scare them into cooperation. The investigative reporter thus placed the photographs in a frame of reference that disqualified the administration's 'few bad apples' argument. Moreover, Hersh presented visual evidence to support his case by making public for the first time photographs that showed American soldiers setting snarling dogs on Iraqi prisoners. While the 'trophy-shots' with American soldiers smiling and doing thumbs-up next to their Iraqi victims seemingly promote the view that 'some kids got out of control' at Abu Ghraib, the photographs of prisoners attacked by military working dogs cannot be so easily isolated from the inference that the acts they depict may have resulted from military policy (See Figures 1 and 2).

The widely viewed CBS show and Seymor M. Hersh's controversial reports in *The New Yorker* set the stage for what, in retrospect, has crystallized as the two competing 'master narratives' in the subsequent debate over how to understand the content and implications of the Abu Ghraib photographs, and, by extension, the meaning of the Iraq war and occupation. On one side were the

Figure 1 'Trophy' shot from the Abu Ghraib prison

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Figure 2 Prisoner attacked by military working dog at the Abu Ghraib prison

official explanations – advanced by the Bush administration in an aggressive news management campaign – which framed the photographs as isolated cases of 'abuse' on the part of a few low-level soldiers. On the other side was the critical counterframe put forth by Hersh and other independent journalists (e.g. Danner, 2004), claiming that the photographs testified to a new policy of torture in the US war on terrorism. However, for all the evidence presented by the alternative press suggesting that ultimately it was policies set by decision elites in Washington that caused the violations, the administration seems to have got the upper hand in the 'framing contest' that followed CBS's breaking of the story over how the Abu Ghraib scandal should be made sensical. As shown by Bennett et al. (2006), the mainstream press declined to challenge the administration, and allowed the 'isolated abuse' frame to dominate the news.

Photographs and news frames

The notion that the Abu Ghraib photos simply shifted public attention and changed the American political climate is evidently simplistic and exaggerated. The images rather drew the nation's attention because they evoked, and helped crystallize, an already existing political discourse critical of US foreign policy (Danner, 2004; Griffin, 2005).

However, even if the shocking photos helped force public attention to wider questions of the Bush administration's handling of prisoners in the war on terror, critics argue that they have also served to deflect attention from those questions. Mark Danner makes the case that the administration employed

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the photographs to support its 'political containment effort' (2004: 11). Officials of the Bush administration used their power strategically to maximize their control over the framing when the story broke, persuading the public to 'focus on the photographs – the garish signboards of the scandal – and not the scandal itself' (Danner, 2004: 15). What has been on trial are the acts depicted in the photographs, and these acts have been carefully segregated as impersonations of 'purposeless sadism', marked off sharply from the responsibility of policy-makers.

In this view, rather than serving as straightforward evidence of the administration's failing foreign policy, the photographs have instead functioned to literally 'frame' the young Americans smiling back at the camera, while obscuring the public's view on wider political and military issues beyond the photographs themselves. Danner's argument is persuasive in the sense that the Bush administration evidently managed to contain the political consequences of the Abu Ghraib scandal during the months after it broke, and to ride out the criticism while avoiding any real shake-up. Still, his categorical distinction between the photographs and the 'scandal itself' has an iconoclastic ring to it.[11] Danner overlooks the extent to which the photographs actually constituted the scandal – in Sontag's (2004) phrasing, 'the horror of what is shown in the photographs cannot be separated from the horror that the photographs were taken' – and, most importantly, the ways in which they have helped preserve the issue of prisoner torture in public and popular discourse.

The Abu Ghraib photos provided an incriminating form of evidence of the violations of prisoners by the US military that was much more difficult to deny and explain away than unrecorded or unwitnessed events.[12] True enough, this appears to be a case where the presumed transparency and documentary truth-value of photographs has been strategically exploited by decision elites to scapegoat the individuals posing in the images, in order to protect those higher-up in the command chain. Still, it is perfectly possible to invert Danner's argument and claim that the photographs, by virtue of their inherent grotesque power, force us to raise questions that go beyond the images 'themselves'. What seems to have disturbed the viewing public most is the fact that the US soldiers could lift a camera in the face of such degradation, without the least sign of compunction, and even derive pleasure from the work at hand. The soldiers' grins and self-congratulatory gestures next to their brutalized victims reveal a sense of entitlement that strongly suggests that their acts were sanctioned by a larger community, thus inevitably evoking questions about wider responsibility, knowledge and culpability.

Griffin may be right in his observation that the US mainstream news media have presented the Abu Ghraib photographs as a 'voyeuristic spectacle' (2005), selling them as nothing more than a sensationalist distraction. However, these

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images have a life beyond the breaking news and the elite political spin. The often critical meanings they have taken on in the wider cultural reception testify to their inherent subversive force, as well as to the creative part played by different audiences in exploiting and re-framing their graphic content.

Cultural perception

The torture photos of Abu Ghraib were instantly appropriated and re-circulated in global and local cultural discourses. In many cases they were transformed into anti-war and anti-American images, 'allowing for the pictures to function as sites of resistance to the very acts they represent' (Apel, 2005). The photograph of the hooded Iraqi prisoner standing on a box has become the most emblematic image of the abuse scandal, appearing in innumerable protest artworks and images. His open-armed gesture suggests Christ on the cross, evoking a long history of devotional images that portray sacred and tortured figures, who remain dignified despite their humiliation (Mitchell, 2004). The serenity of the man on the box, with his outspread gesture of humble sacrifice, appeals to our sympathy and insight. In Sara Boxer's (2004) phrasing, the photo is 'an ad for martyrdom, made in America'.

The hooded man has been reproduced as a mural on a wall in a Baghdad suburb (Locussoi, 2004). The wires attached to his outstretched hands are connected to an electric grid, and a white-hooded Statue of Liberty painted to his right is pulling the switch (See Figure 3). The words scrawled on the wall,

Figure 3 Mural on a wall in a Baghdad suburb, by artist Salaheddin Sallat

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'That Freedom for Bush', completes this critical exposure of the perceived hypocritical rationale for the US invasion. The symbol of liberty wears the sheet of the Klansman, the mask of death – bringing not democracy and freedom but deadly oppression to Iraq. The artist, Salaheddin Sallat, has declared his conviction that the mere act of reproducing the torture images in public helps produce their own undoing (Apel, 2005).

Another example comes from Tehran, Iran, where the photos of the hooded man and of Pfc. Lynndie England holding a prisoner on a leash are painted side by side as murals on a public wall (Apel, 2005; Boxer, 2004) (Figure 4). The juxtaposition of the two images throws the uncertain private and her despicable act of oppression into sharp relief against the noble sacrifice of the hooded 'man of sorrows', who also redresses the naked prisoner on the floor. Again, the idea seems to be that public visibility transforms the photographs from private trophy shots celebrating American supremacy into anti-occupation images that oppose the very views they were meant to uphold.

The perhaps most well-known appropriation of the hooded man in the United States was performed by the graphic design group Forkscrew Graphics in the spring of 2004 (Figure 5). They converted iPod silhouette ads into iRaq protest posters, and plastered the subways and streets of Los Angeles and New York with them.[13] The slick posters in gaudy pop-art colors, inserted among actual iPod ads, spoke ironically of the commercialization of war and the selling of torture as a commodity.[14] Similarly, the Iraq war photomontages exhibited in New York during winter 2004 by artist Martha Rosler are concerned with consumerism, whether of news media images or domestic products (Figure 6).[15] Rosler integrates the Abu Ghraib photographs into elegant American home interiors, referring back to her earlier photomontage series during the Vietnam era – *Bringing the War Home (House Beautiful)* 1967–72 (cf. Williams, 1994). Her photo collages invert the media perception of war as distant and fictional by placing news photographs of soldiers, corpses, and wounded civilians in prosperous suburban American interiors, cut out from home-design magazines.

Figure 4 Mural on a public wall in Tehran, Iran

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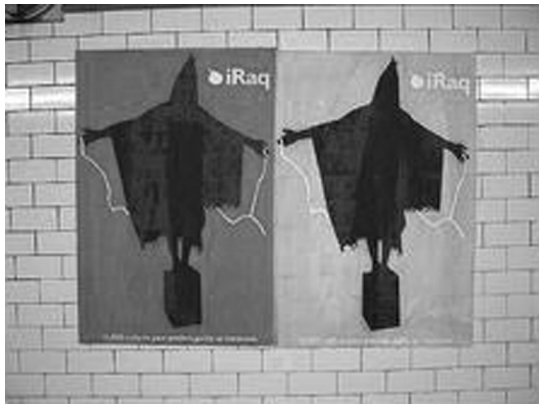

Figure 5 iPod silhouette ads converted into iRaq protest posters by the graphic design group Forkscrew Graphics

Rosler thus foregrounds the deceptive separation of 'war' and 'home' in the news media, effectively connecting 'us' and 'them', 'here' and 'there', public (politics) and private (consumption). If we value, even fetishize, safety in the form of a comfortable, luxurious home, Rosler invades this space with images of torture and war. The realities of battlefield violations and suffering are grafted into our lifestyle fantasies of security and wealth, thus shattering the illusion of pristine interiors closed off from the exterior world.

In contrast to these radical and activist recontextualizations of the Abu Ghraib photographs, the fall 2004 exhibition *Inconvenient Experience: Iraqi Prison Photographs from Abu Ghraib* set out to create a situation where the viewers could 'see the images for what they are, in their own merits, separate from the

Figure 6 Iraq war photomontage by artist Martha Rosler

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politics and the emotions of them'.[16] Seventeen of the images were on view in the show, which was curated by Brian Wallis for the International Center of Photography in New York, and the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. The exhibition was motivated by an educational mission to provide a forum for an American public to seriously contemplate the pictures, inviting the viewers to critical self-reflection. Wallis hoped to counteract the temptation for American viewers to think of the torturers as deviant individuals, since, as he terms it, it is conflicting 'for all of us in the American public to see ourselves in this role, as opposed to the role of liberators'.[17] In his view, a museum context can function to renew the discussion of the meaning of these photographs, and allow for larger questions to be addressed about human nature, national self-image and the administration's 'war on terror'.

That the torture photographs continue to provoke political controversy was demonstrated by the battle raging in lower Manhattan during the summer of 2005 over a proposed memorial at the World Trade Center (WTC) site.[18] The plans to include in the memorial the Drawing Center, an art gallery in SoHo, set off protests from relatives of 9/11 victims and right-wing representantives. The assault on the Drawing Center was launched by New York's *Daily News* on 24 June, with an investigative piece on the gallery's previous exhibitions. The article attested that the gallery 'showcased art that the families of 9/11 victims are denouncing as offensive, anti-American – and a slap in the face of nearly 3,000 dead innocents' (Feiden, 2005). As an example, the article foregrounded a drawing by artist Amy Wilson, entitled *A Glimpse of What Life in a Free Country Can Be Like*, which took center stage in the following debate (Figure 7). The

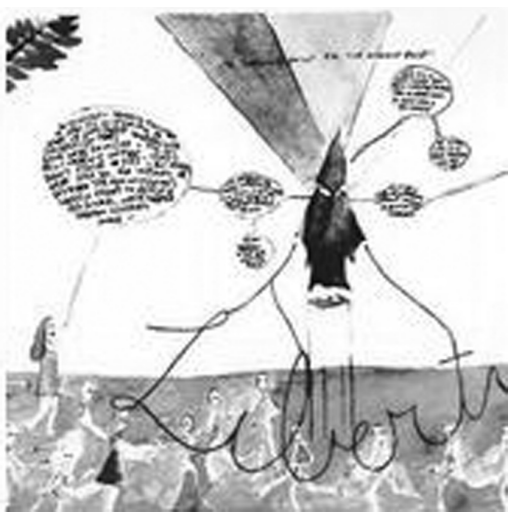

Figure 7 *A Glimpse of What Life in a Free Country Can be Like*. Drawing by artist Amy Wilson

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drawing incorporates the figure of the hooded prisoner from Abu Ghraib, holding a barbed-wire chain spelling out the world 'Liberty'.[19] The response of Governor Georg Pataki to this flare-up exposes the reactionary fear of the torture photographs' power to disrupt the official war narrative: 'We will not tolerate anything at that site that denigrates America, denigrates New York or freedom, or denigrates the sacrifice and courage that the heroes showed on September 11' (Halle, 2005). While the Drawing Center was eventually shown the door, the brand-new International Freedom Center (IFC), also one of the cultural institutions projected for the WTC memorial, avoided a similar fate by promising to accede to Governor Pataki's guidelines. The IFC officially vowed that its programing will be 'appropriately celebratory of our nation and its leading role in the global fight for freedom' (Solomon, 2005).

'Doing a Lynndie'

So far, the examples I have a drawn on all make critical use of the Abu Ghraib photographs, recontextualizing them in ways that highlight American pretensions to racial, cultural, and political domination in Iraq. However, I also want to foreground a more ambiguous and disturbing example of how popular culture has appropriated the abuse photographs, by presenting a case study of how they have been used by a young community built around the popular website 'Doing a Lynndie'.[20] This particular website encourages people to create their own version of the iconic photograph of Pfc. Lynndie England, pointing to the pixeled-out genitalia of an Iraqi prisoner (Figure 8). The site is introduced

Figure 8 Pfc. Lynndie England pointing to the pixeled-out genitalia of an Iraqi prisoner at Abu Ghraib

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by text stating that the image of 'the ugly she-man [. . .] has captured the imagination of young men and women all around the world who don't give much of a shit about anything. The result is a new craze called ''doing a Lynndie''. If you aren't ''doing a Lynndie'' now, you soon will be'.

Internet users across the globe have answered this call to participate in a collaborative, interactive online forum for responding to the Abu Ghraib images (Figures 9a–e). The photo gallery posted on the website shows a wide

Figure 9a

Figure 9b

Figure 9c

Figure 9d

Figure 9e

Figure 9a–e 'Doing a Lynndie'

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variety of victims – friends, parents, pets, celebrities, homeless people etc. – being 'Lynndied' by mostly young people. The idea of the game is to imitate or mimic the female soldier's original gesture, which forms both a gun and a thumbs-up. It is a gesture of empowerment, and also of emasculation, threatening to castrate the blindfolded Iraqi prisoner.

Lynndie England's gesture is appropriated and reinscribed into the website within the parameters of candid camera and practical jokes. To 'Lynndie' someone is thus to put him or her in a humiliating position without knowing it, and secretely to capture it on camera. The explicit intent is further to circulate the resulting photographs on the website, a subset of public forum.

A key question is how to interpret this mimicking game. Why are these young people acting the way they are? There is no evidence that they wish to dissociate themselves from or critique the behaviour of the US soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison. Rather, it mainly seems to be about 'having fun'. In that sense, they take note of and reinforce the entertainment value that (partly) was the intention with the original photographs taken by the American guards at the Iraqi prison. The young men and women performing in these photographs apparently want to come across as funny, clever, creative. We should probably be careful not to be too serious about these photographs, since the principle guiding their creation appears to be the banality of wanting to be entertaining, to get away with childish pranks and get a kick out of it. The website raises the question, however, if the case could be that these types of games serve to distance people from the serious content of the Abu Ghraib photographs. It is worth asking if this 'craze' might serve to gloss over, fictionalize and turn into pure entertainment the violations of Iraqi prisoners.

The images posted on the website also bear other, more critical meanings. It is, after all, a gesture of authoritative power being exercised by the people 'Lynndieing' their victims, serving to elevate themselves and lower the object unaware of the prank. It could be seen as an act of acknowledgement of, maybe even participation in, the violations of the Iraqi prisoners by the US soldiers, serving to reify dominant power relations with disturbing racist, sexist, and demeaning overtones. The inflammatory question that has haunted generations of scholars and others trying to account for the production of fascist Germany comes to mind: where is the line drawn between those who participated, bystanders, and those who resisted? Set against the chilling insights condensed in concepts such as 'everyday fascism' and 'the banality of evil', it is important to at least ask the question to what extent 'Doing a Lynndie' can be understood as an act of participation, or respectively of resistance, and what it tells us about the popular perception of the Abu Ghraib images.

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Conclusion

On the public face, the Bush administration has been rather successful in its 'political containment effort', using the photographs to market the Abu Ghraib scandal as nothing more than a series of sick abuses initiated and performed by the individuals that appear in the images. In this view, the photographs have paradoxically functioned to both bring the allegations of abuse to public focus, and to deflect attention from the wider political implications of the violations. The 'frame challenge' initiated by Hersh did not enjoy much success in the sense that no top political or military official so far has been held accountable.[21]

However, if we are interested in the political operations of iconic war images, and of what sort of power such photographs actually have to affect people's attitudes and behavior, it is of fundamental importance to explore how they also function outside the framings of the mainstream news media and the political elite. The key conclusion of this article is that the Abu Ghraib photographs were not in any simple way 'spoken for' or tamed by the dominant news frames, but quite the opposite: by force of their grim pain-and-pleasure tableaus and their disturbingly private form of address, found typically in family snapshots and jovial party pictures, the photographs have themselves come to function as a critical prism through which elite and popular views on US foreign policy are refracted.

Even if in a short-term perspective the Abu Ghraib photographs seem to have had minimal political or policy repercussions, they nevertheless dealt a significant blow to the United States' mission in Iraq. The images laid bare, graphically and irreversibly, the contradiction between the superpower's well-regarded self-image and the realities of its contempt for a population whom it had ostensibly liberated. The photographs made visible the inherent imperialistic orientation of the administration and the military, in their celebration of the hierarchic power relations of the victor and the conquered. These photographs were bound not only to alienate the Iraqis and much of the Arab world, but also, in a long-term perspective, to percolate into the mind of Americans, and to disrupt the official narrative of the US army as the standard bearer of freedom and democracy, in the sense that the heretofore banned sight of American soldiers in the role of sadistic dominators has become an integral part of our understanding of the US war on terror.

The considerable impact of these photographs is not the least suggested by their proliferation in global and local cultural contexts. Here, the power of the photographs has frequently been explicitly turned against themselves, transforming them into sites of protest and opposition to the very deeds they represent. The dominant news frames originally imposed on the photographs

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by the power-holding elites are thus critically contested in these responses, which rather reflect and reinforce Hersh's endeavor to take the mighty administration to task. Counter to the presuppositions of Entman's (2004) cascade model, these creative and counter-framing practices indicate that we should be careful not to overstate the power of a dominant news frame to guide, or 'prime' the general public's responses to images and the events they represent.

The website 'Doing a Lynndie' provides more worrying insights into how popular culture has appropriated the Abu Ghraib photographs. The entertainment value sits at the surface. Lurking beneath are critical questions about tacit participation in, or even celebratory reinforcing of, the dominant power relations on display in the original photographs. More than anything, my explorative analyses of the cultural reception of the Abu Ghraib photographs point to the necessity of further examination into how audiences respond to news photographic icons, and how such images move into the fabric of people's political consciousness, or consciense. I am of course referring to effects that are latent, indirect, and subtle, and therefore hard to 'measure'. Nonetheless, to account for such effects presents one of the most urgent challenges to media scholars, if we want to arrive at a better, more informed idea of how images are received and employed not only in the power struggles waged within the war on terror, but in any site of contest and struggle.

Notes

1 See for example Arrieta-Walden, 2004; Barrett, 2004; Folkenflik, 2004; Goldstein, 2004; Sante, 2004; *The Nation*, 2004.

2 Bolter and Grusin (1999) argue that 'remediation' is a defining characteristic of the new digital media, which achieve their cultural significance by representing, refashioning or absorbing older media such as painting, photography, film, and television (cf. Note 5).

3 See Robinson (2002) for an incisive settlement with the myth of critical media influence on intervention during humanitarian crises.

4 For instance, Sontag (1977: 21) holds that 'photography has done at least as much to deaden conscience as arouse it', and Barthes (1981: 170) argues that the photograph 'de-realizes the human world of conflicts and desires under the pretext of illustrating it'. Along similar lines, cultural critics such as Boorstin (1961), Postman (1985), and Habermas (1989) have articulated their distaste for the moral and intellectual depravity of the image (cf. Simons, 2003).

5 A relevant question for this article is obviously if and how the viewing experience of the Abu Ghraib photographs changes when they are 'remediated' by other media such as television and the web. I would argue that on the spectrum outlined by Bolter and Grusin (1999: 45 ff.), where at one extreme a medium is mainly 'highlighted and represented' and at the other aggressively refashioned or entirely

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appropriated by another medium, the journalistic use of the Abu Ghraib photographs in/by other media such as television and the web falls into the former category. The question of how televisual and other media specific conventions might change the way photographs communicate is an issue worth addressing in its own right, but it falls outside the scope of this article.

6 In September 2005 the Abu Ghraib photographs were brought to the public fore again when a New York judge ruled in favor of a request from the American Civil Liberties Union for hitherto unseen pictures of Iraqi inmates being tortured by US troops to be released. Earlier, the judge had said in court that he thought 'photographs present a different level of detail and are the best evidence the public can have of what occurred' (Neumeister, 2005).

In February 2006, the Australian news media and the website http://salon.com unveiled previously unpublished photos and videos of US troops torturing prisoners at Abu Ghraib, which forced the Bush administration to 'defend its record and try to regain the public relations initiative' (*AP/The New York Times*, 2006). A BBC world affairs correspondent termed it 'The return of Abu Ghraib', and argued that the images were a 'reminder that unanswered questions remain about the abuses at Abu Ghraib, the main being how far up the chain of command the abusive behaviour went' (Reynold, 2006).

7 Entman defines framing as 'the process of selecting and highlighting some aspects of a perceived reality, and enhancing the salience of an interpretation and evaluation of that reality' (2004: 26).

8 The analysis is not undertaken to underwrite the supposition that dominant news frames determine pictorial impact, but, quite the opposite, to elucidate the role and limitations of such frames in shaping the wider cultural perception of iconic news photographs.

9 I refer to the two framing functions foregrounded by Entman (2004), *problem definition* (what casual force created the newsworthy event) and *remedy* (policy options).

10 In his subsequent book *Chain of Command,* which draws heavily on these and other articles in *The New Yorker* magazine, Hersh brings the conclusions of his reportings to a head. He writes, 'the roots of the Abu Ghraib scandal lie not in the criminal inclinations of a few Army reservists, but in the reliance of George Bush and Donald Rumsfeld on secret operations and the use of coercion – an eye-for-eye retribution – in fighting terrorism' (Hersh, 2004d: 46).

11 This is not unlike the historical protests against the human tendency to worship images of our own creation rather than the 'real' thing (cf. Morgan, 2005).

12 As Thompson (2000: 68 ff.) argues, 'fixed symbolic material', such as letters, photographs and tape-recorded conversations, play an important role in mediated scandals, providing tangible evidence in support of contestable claims.

13 Forkscrew Graphics explicitly states that the iRaq poster is about 'retaking the field of political discourse'. It is about refusing to let 'the military-industrial complex' and 'the halls of advertising power' set the terms of debate, but allowing for 'revolutionary diverse' opinions to be heard. See http://www.forkscrew.com/main.html

14 The commodification of torture is performed both through the military's 'outsourcing' of the task of interrogation to 'private contractors' (Apel, 2005), and through the media's profit-seeking launching of the photographs as sensationalist spectacle.

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15 Martha Rosler, *Photomontages: 1965–2004*, 19 November 2004 – 8 January 2005, Gorney Bravin & Lee Gallery, New York City.
16 Curator Brian Wallis in an interview on the Leonard Lopate Show, Thursday, 7 October 2004.
17 Curator Brian Wallis in an interview on the Leonard Lopate Show, Thursday, 7 October 2004.
18 See Cotter, 2005; Feiden, 2005; Halle, 2005; Healy, 2005; Kaysen, 2005; *New York Daily News*, 2005; Solomon, 2005.
19 It was the reporter Douglas Feiden (2005) from the *Daily News* who dug up the Abu Ghraib drawing from a catalogue in the Drawing Center's archive, making the case that 'placing it at Ground Zero is committing a second criminal act against our dead'.
20 See http://badgas.co.uk/lynndie/. The analysis does not aim at drawing any general conclusions about the perception of the photographs, but is used in an explorative way to generate questions and suggestions for further research into the ways audiences use and understand news media images.
21 An Army inspector general's report was issued in late April 2005, and designed to be the Army's final word on the responsibility of senior officers in relation to the abuses at Abu Ghraib. The report cleared senior Army officers of all allegations of wrongdoing in the abuse of prisoners in Iraq and elsewhere (see Wypijewski, 2006).

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