Digital Technology and Media Spectacle

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   The unfolding of the panorama of images of US prisoner abuse of Iraqis and the quest to pin responsibility on the soldiers and higher US military and political authorities is one of the most intense media spectacles of contemporary journalism. Evoking universal disgust and repugnance, the images of young American soldiers humiliating Iraqis circulated with satellite-driven speed through broadcasting channels, the Internet, and print media and may stand as some of the most influential images of all time.

   While the photos put on display the ubiquity of media spectacle and the powerful impact of images, their digital origins and circulation also require consideration. Upon obtaining over 1,000 digital photos shortly after the initial cycle of images was released by CBS and The New Yorker, the Washington Post commented that while many of the images revealed shocking poses of prisoner abuse, many more were of mundane scenes of daily life in Iraq. Moreover, the digital archive was not the work of professional photojournalists, but of young US soldiers. It was as if a generation raised on the media and in possession of digital cameras and camcorders naturally documented its own life, as if one was a participant in a reality TV show or political documentary.

   Although there were claims that the images were intended for use to intimidate new Iraqi prisoners and to "soften them up" for interrogation, the pictures also emerged from fascination with taking pictures and the digital documentation of everyday life. They also revealed how quickly such images could leave a foreign country under US military control by way of the Internet and circulate quickly around the world. The Pentagon indicated in the Senate and House Hearings on the Iraq scandal on May 6 that many, many more photos and video were in play and would be circulated in the days ahead, as indeed there have been daily revelations of new prisoner abuse and photos.

   Whereas the US censored every image and word in the pool system concocted for the 1991 Gulf war and had strict guidelines and control mechanisms for the embedded reporters in the 2003 Iraq intervention, the digital age has made it ultimately impossible to hide the dark sides of the current Iraq occupation. The widespread use of digital cameras and the ease with which images can be shot and disseminated, including direct transmission through wireless connections, demonstrated how media spectacle could trump US military control and circulate highly damaging representations of US abuse of Iraqis. As Donald Rumsfeld exclaimed during the Iraq prisoner abuse hearings on May 7: "people are running around with digital cameras and taking these unbelievable photographs and then passing them off, against the law, to the media, to our surprise, when they had not even arrived in the Pentagon."

The role of media images in warfare and new role of digital spectacle was dramatized further on May 11 when gruesome imagery of American Nick Berg's beheading was released to the global media. The horrifying shots quickly circulated and made it clear that digital technology was an asymmetric tool of war that any side could use to sway public opinion and to confront the awful horrors of war. It was also becoming clear that Bush's Iraq intervention was a Horror Show that would continue to shock and awe global audiences in the foreseeable future.

Yet revelations during the same week that photos of alleged Iraqi prisoner abuse by British soldiers were fakes, and subsequent admission that they were, also reveals the fragile nature of digital imagery, that it can be altered and faked, and that it is hard to differentiate between real images and digital simulacra. Yet the sheer volume and ugliness of the images of US prisoner abuse trumped epistemological reflections upon the image and instead focused attention on the catastrophe of the Iraqi war itself and what it was doing to both the Iraqis and US occupation forces.

Deeply rooted racism stands behind and fuels the Iraqi prisoner abuse as soldiers and the US public have widely viewed Iraqis and Arabs as less than human since the Gulf war of 1991. Arabs and Iraqis have been villains of countless Hollywood films and US TV shows, while racism toward all Arabs and Moslems intensified after the 9/11 attacks. In the first Gulf war, US soldiers went on a "turkey shoot," slaughtering hundreds of Iraqis escaping from Kuwait City near the end of the war. During the current Iraq war, US snipers talk of "rats nests" of Iraqi troops and cheer when they take out the "vermin." US architect for the failed Iraq invasion, Paul Wolfowitz, speaks of "snakes" and "draining the swamps" in "uncivilized parts of the world."

Such racist and dehumanizing perceptions facilitate reducing Iraqi prisoners to animals and less-than-human brutes as when the now notorious woman MP Lyndee English tied a leash around a naked Iraqi prisoner as if he was a dog, or US soldiers perversely constructed stacks of naked Iraqi bodies into sexually humiliating positions as if they were a horde of animals. The image of Lyndee England pointing to an Iraqi male prisoner masturbating with one thumb up and another pointing to the Iraqi's genitals, accompanied by a grotesque leer, again points to the pornographic nature of the prisoner abuse. In another shocking image, a hooded Iraqi prisoner standing atop a box has his arms stretched out and wires attached to his fingers connected to electrical lines. The hood evokes the Ku Klux Klan and their notorious lynching, while the pose of the Iraqi with his arms spread out evokes Christ on the cross, and the monstrous and grotesque figure as a whole reminds art-sensitive viewers of Goya's sketches of the horrors of war.

Only a deeply racist mentality could imagine and engage in such attacks that put on display an unmastered racist brutality that wars seem to unfold. The pictures also elicit a brutal colonial mentality. The Washington Post noted that the cache of more than 1000 digital pictures revealed that the young troops took pictures of camels, exotic vistas of Iraq, and scenes of ordinary people, as well as the copious prisoner abuse and disgusting prison pictures. Many of the quasi-pornographic images released of the Iraqi male prisoners depicted a femininization of them, naked or in women's undergarments, and

passively humiliated and emasculated. There is, of course, a long tradition of taking exotic pictures of faraway places, just as there is a tradition of documenting bloody atrocity scenes in wartime. In a digital age, these genres and impulses merged together, producing a panorama of horror that may end military careers and deflate American imperial ambitions in the Middle East for a generation.

To be sure, the pornographic overtones and participation by men and women along with the gloating and smirking faces of the US prison guards made the particular Abu Ghraib prison images especially toxic and explosive. Yet any number of other images of dead Iraqi civilians, US bombing errors, brutal treatment by the US forces of Iraqis, and the like could be easily documented and distributed through the world media. Part of the shock and distress of the images resulted from the sanitized view of the Iraq intervention in the US corporate media. Wars are often defined in the public mind by negative images of atrocity, such as the naked young girl fleeing in Vietnam, with her body scarred by napalm, or the image of a young US soldier lighting a peasant hut on fire with his cigarette lighter. Iraq, too, may be remembered by horrific images, in this case taken by the US troops themselves.

So far, it has been largely Arab media which have focused upon the unsavory aspects of the US Iraq invasion and occupation, showing many bloody images of Iraqi civilian victims of US military action and unflattering images of US military forces and politicians. With the Pandora's Box of Iraqi Evils now opened, with the media's tendency toward pack journalism and the feeding frenzy of the moment, and with genuine fear and concerns about the direction of the Bush administration's Iraq invasion and occupation among broad segments of the public, there are certain to be many, many more disturbing images of the growing global media spectacle of US misadventures in Iraq and outrage concerning the entire failed enterprise.

In a media age, images are impossible to control and a media spectacle concocted to be a triumphal display of US military power can easily reverse into a spectacle of US arrogance, brutality, and malfeasance. Yet if the images display the errors of US policy and can be used globally to demonstrate the abuse and torture of prisoners, and if they eventually force the US to reverse its disastrous Iraq policies, they will prove to be examples of media images that changed the world.

Moreover, their widespread distribution and the impassioned debate around them could send the message that abuse and torture of prisoners is unacceptable, thus forcing governments and the military to cease and desist with actions that many people see as a violation of human rights and form of barbaric atavism. The impact of media spectacles are highly unpredictable and it is possible that the distressing circulation of images of Iraqi prisoner abuse could eventually have lasting, positive effects on international law and the treatment of prisoners.