Publicity, Pornography, or Everyday Media Practice?
On the Abu Ghraib Photographs

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According to Richard Grusin, the reason that the photographs from Abu Ghraib triggered such a commotion is not that they cross the ethical boundaries of media practice. He believes that their similarity to everyday media practices of producing and circulating digital images is the cause.

What makes a geopolitical issue a matter of public concern to us and global media? In this essay I address this question by reference to Abu Ghraib, which has almost certainly been the single issue of greatest public media concern that has arisen in the more than four years since the US invaded Iraq in March 2003. Why have the photographs from Abu Ghraib had a public and political impact far greater than, say, the unlawful establishment of a detention centre at Guantanamo Bay, or the policy and practice of 'extraordinary rendition', or the countless other US violations of the Geneva Convention and the bounds of accepted behaviour more generally? From one perspective the answer would appear to be self-evident. Indeed it is precisely self-evidence that underwrites the immediately disturbing nature of the photographs: they themselves are 'self-evident', that is, they provide visual evidence of degrading, brutal torture and violence. The photographs don't lie. Verbal reports of torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere had been circulating for some time in early 2004, and the US Army had been investigating criminal abuse at the prison since May 2003. Nonetheless, it was only after an American television 'news-magazine', *60 Minutes II*, showed the now-iconic photos of 'hooded man' and 'leashed man' on prime-time US TV on 28 April 2004, that the mainstream news media, the global public, and the American government were forced to do something about it. The common explanation for the publicity garnered by these photographs has to do with the fact that the events depicted were horrible and that seeing is believing, that visual imagery has a much more powerful impact than verbal accounts do. True enough. Photographs, unlike printed texts, are by their nature public, visible, out in the open. Once they have been released, what they depict can't be ignored.

But might there be another explanation, one that concerns not only the nature of the criminal abuse revealed by the photographs, but also our experience of the photographs as sociotechnical, material artefacts – the way in which their production and circulation were part and parcel of our everyday media practices? Could the powerful and immediate public outcry caused by the release of the photographs be explained not only because the photographs made visible horrible acts of torture, completely out of the ordinary and beyond the pale of acceptable, civilized, humane behaviour, but also because the practice of producing and circulating the Abu Ghraib photographs was continuous with our own acceptable, civilized, everyday, humane media practices? Rather than consider the Abu Ghraib photographs as transparent windows through which we could view unthinkable, horrible practices of torture and humiliation (practices virtually identical to those going on in Guantanamo Bay or elsewhere in occupied Iraq or Afghanistan or at clandestine torture

sites around the globe), what would it mean to consider them as sociotechnical artefacts, operating within a premediated network of media practices similar, if not identical, to those practices widespread among students, tourists, parents, pet-owners, photo-bloggers, and in the military itself? Could it be that what made Abu Ghraib into an issue of worldwide public media attention was not what the photographs revealed about acts of torture and humiliation that were almost universally and immediately understood to be beyond the pale even of military interrogation, but what they revealed about our own media practices, how they operated within our everyday media? Did Abu Ghraib become a matter of worldwide public media concern because the criminal acts of torture performed there by US soldiers were documented and circulated through practices of taking digital photographs, uploading photos on web-sites, and e-mailing those photographs to friends and family that are of a piece with our own everyday practices of photographing our pets, our vacations, or our loved ones, and then sharing these images with friends, family, or strangers via the same media of file-sharing, email, social networking, mobile phones, and the web – practices with which global citizens are becoming increasingly familiar and comfortable?

One approach to answering these questions can be found in the response by Democrat Richard 'Dick' Durbin, then Assistant Minority Leader of the US Senate, after being shown the entire set of photographs from Abu Ghraib in a classified session. Durbin recalls: 'You can't imagine what it's like to go to a closed room where you have a classified briefing, and stand shoulder to shoulder with your colleagues in the Senate, and see hundreds and hundreds of slides like those of Abu Ghraib, most of which have never been publicly disclosed. I had a sick feeling when I left. … It was then that I began to have suspicions that something significant was happening at the highest levels of the government when it came to torture policy. [1] Although objecting to the US military's apparently government-sanctioned practice of torture and humiliation as depicted in the photographs, Durbin is also reacting to the mediality of the photographs themselves, the act of viewing photographic slides standing shoulder to shoulder with his colleagues in the Senate. Interestingly, Durbin does not say 'you can't imagine what it's like to see such horrible acts of torture', but rather 'you can't imagine what it's like to … stand shoulder to shoulder with your Senate colleagues and see hundreds and hundreds of these photos'. What he comments on is the humiliation, the embarrassment, of being side-by-side with his Senate colleagues and looking at such photographs, where he might in some other circumstances have stood with many of those same colleagues to look at pictures of their children's weddings or their most recent vacation or a new house they might have bought. Durbin's formulation of his response is not, I would argue, meaningless, but rather points our attention to the connection between the global media publicity garnered by these photographs from Abu Ghraib and their continuity with our everyday media practices.

Sexual Component

Shortly after the release of the Abu Ghraib photos, Susan Sontag addressed their status as media artefacts in her powerful essay 'Regarding the Torture of Others', arguing that the horror of the acts of torture depicted in the photographs could not be separated from the horror of the acts of photography themselves. [2] Sontag likens these photographs to those that German soldiers took of the horrors of Nazi concentration camps in the Second World War, or to those taken of lynching victims by Ku Klux Klansman in the USA, who then distributed them to their friends and family as postcards. Furthermore, she recognizes the heightened impact of the widespread possession of digital cameras and the ease of circulating photos across networked media: 'Where once photographing war was the province of photojournalists, now the soldiers themselves are all photographers – recording their war, their fun, their observations of what they find picturesque, their atrocities – and swapping images among themselves and e-mailing them around the globe.' For Sontag, however, what soldiers find 'fun' seems increasingly beyond the pale of what she considers to be moral behaviour, particularly insofar as it seems connected with

the prevalence of internet pornography: 'An erotic life is, for more and more people, that whither can be captured in digital photographs and on video. And perhaps the torture is more attractive, as something to record, when it has a sexual component. It is surely revealing, as more Abu Ghraib photographs enter public view, that torture photographs are interleaved with pornographic images of American soldiers having sex with one another. In fact, most of the torture photographs have a sexual theme, as in those showing the coercing of prisoners to perform, or simulate, sexual acts among themselves. … [M]ost of the pictures seem part of a larger confluence of torture and pornography: a young woman leading a naked man around on a leash is classic dominatrix imagery. And you wonder how much of the sexual tortures inflicted on the inmates of Abu Ghraib was inspired by the vast repertory of pornographic imagery available on the Internet – and which ordinary people, by sending out Webcasts of themselves, try to emulate.[3]

Sontag calls attention to the mediality of the photographs primarily to condemn them for what they reveal about the media environment from which they emerge – or more specifically to condemn the culture that produces both that media environment and the soldiers who inhabit it: 'For the meaning of these pictures is not just that these acts were performed, but that their perpetrators apparently had no sense that there was anything wrong in what the pictures show.' On the one hand she argues that the horror of these images derives in large part from how they function *as photographs* ; on the other hand she condemns the Bush administration for thinking that 'the fault or horror lay in the images, not in what they depict'. For Sontag, what these images depict is the corruption of American culture: 'What is illustrated by these photographs is as much the culture of shamelessness as the reigning admiration for unapologetic brutality.' Ironically, the terms of Sontag's condemnation of the Abu Ghraib photographs are not very different (at least medialogically) from the morally conservative position that the existence of the Abu Ghraib photographs (if not the torture itself) derives from America's media culture: 'It is hard to measure the increasing acceptance of brutality in American life, but its evidence is everywhere, starting with the video games of killing that are a principal entertainment of boys – can the video game 'Interrogating the Terrorists' really be far behind?' – and on to the violence that has become endemic in the group rites of youth on an exuberant kick.[4] In the weeks following the release of the Abu Ghraib photos, such condemnation of US media culture was a staple of conservative Christian media, exemplified in print, televisual, and networked news media by figures like born-again Watergate conspirator Charles Colson or Ted Olsen, former US Solicitor General who successfully represented George W. Bush in Bush v. Gore, the US Supreme Court case that effectively handed Bush the presidency. While on most issues their politics are diametrically opposed, both Sontag and the Christian right acknowledge the importance of thinking about the Abu Ghraib photographs in relation to US media practices. In doing so, however, their arguments focus on content and morality, seeking chiefly to pin the blame on somebody else's media practices, by seeing both the Abu Ghraib torture and the Hollywood media-industrial entertainment complex as beyond the pale of humane, civilized, moral behaviour. My argument about the mediality of the photographs, on the other hand, focuses on the continuity between the formal, technical media practices entailed in the Abu Ghraib photos and our own everyday practices of digital photography. While we cannot ignore the force of the content of the photos in producing public outrage, I want to explain this nearly instantaneous and universal publicity in terms of the medialogical affinities between looking at the Abu Ghraib photos on TV, in the newspaper, or on the web and our everyday practices of seeing photos of friends, family, or co-workers, or looking at photographs in the news, or the affinities between our ordinary digital photographic practices, including posting them on the internet and emailing them to friends, and the media practices engaged in by the soldiers at Abu Ghraib.

US Popular Media Culture

Like Sontag, Slavoj Žižek also finds the crux of the matter of the Abu Ghraib photos to lie

in their continuity with US popular media culture, characterizing them as depicting 'the obscene underside of US popular culture'. [5] But Žižek's response differs from Sontag's in one crucial respect. Although Sontag might agree that the photographs represent the obscene underside of American culture, she would stop short of Žižek's provocative claim that 'the Iraqi prisoners were effectively being initiated into American culture; they were getting a taste of the obscenity that counterpoints the public values of personal dignity, democracy and freedom'. Even while seeing the events of Abu Ghraib as initiating the Iraqi prisoners into American culture, however, Žižek would erase the medialogical significance of the photographs. Žižek is unable to see that what makes the Abu Ghraib incident most congruent with everyday American popular culture is its participation in the practices of taking digital photographs and circulating them across premediated sociotechnical networks like the internet or email, and the continuity between these practices and the creation of a media public. While he is right to see the events of Abu Ghraib as continuous with US popular culture, he does not make the connections with media practices explicit, but continues to see the photographs simply as *evidence*. 'The photographs don't lie.' In Žižek's account Abu Ghraib is still understood through a media logic in which photographs or other audiovisual or textual media function as representations of prior events, as records, as evidence, as testimony. What this perspective, and these reports, fail to see is the way in which the photographs do not simply report or testify to immoral or pornographic political, criminal, or military events at Abu Ghraib, but are themselves specific, distinct media events that act with their own political and social consequences.

Žižek's erasure of the mediality of the photographs is most tellingly evident in his discussion of a widely cited quotation from Donald Rumsfeld, in which Rumsfeld distinguishes between 'known knowns', 'known unknowns' and 'unknown unknowns'. Žižek astutely points out that Rumsfeld omits the most important permutation of this sequence, the 'unknown knowns', the 'things we don't know that we know, which is precisely the Freudian unconscious, the "knowledge which doesn't know itself," as Lacan used to say. … The Abu Ghraib scandal shows where the real dangers are: in the "unknown knowns," the disavowed beliefs, suppositions, and obscene practices we pretend not to know about, although they form the flipside of public morality.' Characteristically defining 'unknown knowns' as the Freudian unconscious, Žižek fails to recognize the other kinds of 'knowledge which doesn't know itself' at work in this incident, such as the kinds of knowledge built in to our media practices, into the hardware and software of our digital formats. That is, in addition to those 'unknown knowns' that reside in our unconscious there are any number of other unknown knowns built in to our media practices in ways that we are not aware of, in ways that we do not know that we know – not because they have been repressed or sublimated, but because they are concealed or invisible or unrecognized in everyday practices that we participate in and take for granted. Katherine Hayles makes a similar point in a different context, invoking Nigel Thrift's idea of the '*technological unconscious'* which refers to 'the everyday habits initiated, regulated, and disciplined by multiple strata of technological devices and inventions, ranging from an artifact as ordinary as a wristwatch to the extensive and pervasive effects of the World Wide Web'. [6] Part of the force of the Abu Ghraib photographs comes precisely from their participation in our technological unconscious – the way in which they are integrated within our everyday nonconscious use of technology. What enabled the photographs from Abu Ghraib to create an almost instant issue of global media publicity was not just that they brought to the consciousness of the global public the criminal behaviour of the soldiers involved, but that the consciousness of this behaviour was mediated by the unconscious or nonconscious documentation and circulation of this behaviour across networked media. That is to say, not only does this nonconscious behaviour make the photos into objects of media publicity, but the way in which this behaviour duplicates and intersects with our own premediated media practices adds to their publicity.

NTFU.com

I conclude by turning to a more recent, but much less publicized, controversy over scandalous digital photographs circulated on the Web by US soldiers in Iraq, as a way to dispute the claim that the Abu Ghraib photographs were pornographic and that this was what made them into such objects of media publicity. On 28 September 2005, the *New York Times* reported that the US Army was investigating photographs of Iraqi war dead that had been posted on a website called NowThatsFuckedUp.com (NTFU), owned by an American named Chris Wilson, but hosted in Amsterdam. The *Times* piece refers to a September 20 article in the online *Journalism Review*, the first mainstream US venue to report the story (though it had been investigated by a journalist / blogger associated with the *Christian Science Monitor*, who had learned about it from an Italian blogger and the Italian news agency ANSA). If the story's complex provenance is typical of the interwoven linkages among the blogosphere and networked news media, both print and online, the details of the story itself are less typical, even though it entails many of the same elements raised by the Abu Ghraib photos – graphic photographic images, the violation of Geneva Conventions, the relationship between pornography and violence, the omnipresence of digital cameras. NTFU.com was created as a bulletin board site for (mainly) men to exchange pornographic images of their girlfriends or wives. The site had a structure familiar to anyone who has used similar forums, offering general access boards for the public as well as special access boards for those who provided a certain level of content to the site or who were willing to pay for it. NTFU quickly became popular with soldiers in Iraq and elsewhere, who began to post soft-core pictures of partially dressed, partially nude female soldiers. After the Pentagon blocked access to the site from computers in the field and soldiers in Iraq reported difficulty using their credit cards to access some of the paid features of the site, Wilson decided to offer soldiers free access to these features in exchange for photos from the field. His (ungrammatical and geopolitically uninformed) offer on the site reads: 'As a Thank-You for the work you do and the sacrifices you make I would like to offer you guys who want it the ability to get free access as a SUPPORTER member. [PAR] Just post a picture of you guys hanging out, or saying hi, or of other cool stuff you see while your there. Something like the kinda pictures you would be sending home to your family and friends. Lets see some tanks, guns, the place your living in, some dead Taliban, just anything. I would like to get a glimpse of what you guys are seeing over there and I think everyone here would also. [PAR] In return for your submission I will give you SUPPORTER access in the forums. When I get a few pictures I will setup a special forum called something like 'Pictures From The Field' or something like that and post them all there for people to see.' Many of the soldiers began to post photos that depicted mutilated dead bodies and parts of bodies of Iraqi civilians and insurgents, the kinds of images that the Bush administration as well as the mainstream media sought systematically to prevent the American and global public from seeing.

News stories covering the NTFU incident emphasized its connection with Abu Ghraib and brought up many of the same issues raised by those photographs; nonetheless there was very little public awareness of these photos among the US or global media. Perhaps because it never became a significant media issue, the US Army decided not to pursue disciplinary charges against soldiers who had posted on the site. But on 7 October 2005, Wilson was arrested in his home in Lakeland, Florida, by Polk county sheriff's deputies on charges of obscenity – not for the photos of Iraqi dead but for the sexually explicit photos on the site. Four days later he was released on bail. On 16 December 2005, his bail was revoked and he was returned to jail because he had continued to operate the website while out on bail. On 13 January of the following year, Wilson pleaded guilty to five misdemeanour obscenity charges in exchange for the state of Florida agreeing to drop its felony charge against him as well as the remaining 295 obscenity counts. He also agreed not to work on any adult websites for the next five years and to shut down his site within

90 days, after which he turned over the URL to the Polk County Sheriff's Office, which now hosts the site with its own anti-pornography message. Wilson has not completely disappeared, however. On 31 March 2006 he opened a short-lived site called barbecuestopper.com, which followed the same bulletin board format as NTFU. He is now the purveyor of the Liberal Blogger, a site that, from the statistical evidence provided, has failed to find its audience. Unlike Abu Ghraib, this incident has dropped out of the media's sight.

I introduce this incident of war photos traded for pornography not to make the now familiar claim that such photos are themselves pornographic. Rather I introduce this incident as a way to think about what makes an issue into a matter of public concern, how media and publicity interact with what I would call our media everyday. Even less than the Abu Ghraib photos, I would argue, these photos of Iraqi dead bear little formal relationship to the photographic conventions of pornography, nor are they designed to arouse their viewers erotically, unlike the photos of female American soldiers and other amateur pornography that was posted on the NTFU site. Following the lead of now-familiar arguments by feminists and critics concerning pornography, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, Sontag and others equate the photos of Abu Ghraib with pornography based upon the degrading and damaging effect of such images on those who produce the images, those whom the images reproduce, and those who consume them. Although such arguments about the injuriousness of pornography continue to be contested on a variety of fronts, there is a good deal of force to them. And it is hard to imagine anyone who would argue against the damage produced and documented by the Abu Ghraib photos. Nonetheless, if we think about how the Abu Ghraib photos functioned medialogically, about the kinds of work they perform, it is hard to think of them as pornography. Felix Guattari has suggested that in considering behaviour like obsessive hand-washing, we think not of its significance, but of its sensation, 'the feeling that one is in the washing of one's hands'. [7] If we think of the Abu Ghraib photos in this way, I am inclined to agree with Žižek's characterization of them as operating something like trophy photos of fraternity pranks do, as productive not of the feeling that one is being sexually aroused, but of the feeling that one is displaying a trophy. Indeed, irrespective of the sexual components of the behaviour produced for and documented in the Abu Ghraib photos, I would argue that this was not what made them into global media issues. On the contrary, in the case of NTFU, the conjunction of graphic images of dead bodies and internet pornography helped prevent this issue from becoming a matter of widespread media concern. For while internet pornography is widespread enough that it has become a regular staple of comedy in popular media, the images themselves are not yet visible on US televisual or other popular media. Not unlike dead and mutilated bodies, the naked bodies or those engaged in sexual activity are still kept out of the media public. We know that they are there, we can refer to them humorously or seriously or with shock and outrage, but we are not allowed to see them.

Why did the photographs from Abu Ghraib become an issue of global media publicity? Put most epigrammatically, the media publicity created by the photos from Abu Ghraib lies less in the significance of what they show us than in the sensation they produce, the feeling that in looking at the Abu Ghraib photos we are participating in our ordinary practices of mediality.

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Footnotes

1. Jane Mayer, 'A Deadly Interrogation', *The New Yorker*, 14 November 2005.
2. Susan Sontag, 'Regarding the Torture of Others,' *New York Times Magazine*, 23 May 2004.
3. The connection between the Abu Ghraib photographs and pornography has been widespread. See, for example, David Simpson, *9 / 11: The Culture of Commemoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Susan Willis, *Portents of the Real: A Primer for Post-9 / 11 America* (London / New York: Verso, 2005).
4. Simpson and Willis (op. cit. note 3), too, draw the connection between Abu Ghraib and video games.
5. Slavoj Žižek, 'Between Two Deaths,' *London Review of Books*, 8 July 2004.
6. 'Human cognition', Hayles explains, 'increasingly takes place within environments where human behavior is entrained by intelligent machines through such everyday activities as cursor movement and scrolling, interacting with computerized voice tress, talking and text messaging on cell phones, and searching the web to find whatever information is needed at the moment. … Enmeshed within this flow of data, human behavior is increasingly integrated with the technological nonconscious through somatic responses, haptic feedback, gestural interactions, and a wide variety of other cognitive activities that are habitual and repetitive and that therefore fall below the threshold of conscious awareness.' N. Katherine Hayles, 'Traumas of Code,' *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 33 (2006), 140; Nigel Thrift, 'Remembering the Technological Unconscious by Foregrounding Knowledges of Position,' *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22 (2004).
7. Felix Guattari, 'On Machines,' *Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts* 6 (1995).

Tags

Affect, Image, Media Society