New Media and the Iraq War: Restricted Images and Unsanctioned Sources

by

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And for my mother, Hope: I know you are in a garden somewhere, or collecting glass on a seashore, and despite your heavenly surroundings, you are still swearing about, “What an f-ing liar that Dick Cheney is!” I miss you so much. You have been with me every day of this project.
For Mama,
(1949-2007)

*Who never beat a war drum*
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Introduction

“We are all hostages of media intoxication.”
Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*

On an early October day in 2006, I opened up *The New York Times* Arts section and became instantly engaged with an article; one that I thought depicted some of the strange conundrums of 21st century American life. The article discussed violent videos posted onto YouTube, videos that show American soldiers under dangerous attacks. The origins of such videos were diverse. Some international YouTube users added the videos with subtitles in Arabic, along with “tags”\(^1\) of anti-American sentiment. Other videos came from American soldiers. One such video shot by a soldier depicts a Humvee getting hit by an I.E.D and then exploding. Quickly after *The New York Times* began to research the material and contacted the YouTube offices for information, the videos were removed from the site. For me, the article was indicative of the near impossibility of total-censorship in the digital age:

> At a time when the Bush administration has restricted photographs of the coffins of military personnel returning to the United States and the Pentagon keeps close tabs on videotapes of combat operations taken by the news media, the videos give average Americans a level of access to combat scenes rarely available before, if ever.\(^2\)

I realized then that it was true, I had not seen a single flag-draped coffin since the War in Iraq began. Where were these photos? What are the implications that the government “restricts” their release?

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\(^1\) Blogging term used at the end of blog posts, video uploads, etc. which label the post’s major themes.  
I was only five years old when the Gulf War took place, so my memories of that war remain sparse. I remember seeing Saddam Hussein and his black mustache on the television; I remember some fellow pre-schooler saying the word “Kuwait.” My next-door neighbor’s father left home with a shaved head and in a sand-colored uniform, our moms explained to us that Ricky’s Daddy “is in the Reserves”. These few memories formed a simple introduction to American foreign policy. Growing up in a politically minded (and Clinton devoted) family in the 1990’s, I thought America was invincible and righteous. The countries of Somalia, Rwanda, and Bosnia only trickled into my consciousness. My young mind never thought about America’s enemies. This all changed in 10th grade, on September 11th 2001, when I began to question the place of violence, trauma, and the new threat of terrorism in American society.

*The Times* article encapsulated this bizarre moment of history. As our technology continues to evolve, traditional power structures struggle to compete. It is a curious difference: the way that the Bush Administration can implement policy to forbid the *pictures* of coffins (the physical representations of loss in war), but video portrayals of the war’s violence show up on the Internet. The article examined the intersection between technology and the War on Terror, and commented on the lawless nature of both. After reading the article, I thought about the political climate following 9/11, and the many times our nation watched the Twin Towers fall on TV news. On the Internet, cell-phone shot videos showed the plane crashing into the second tower. These images forever represent the tragedy of that day. It occurred to

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3 Or as Jean Baudrillard argues, “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place”; see chapter 1.
me, we really have not seen any images of death or violence since our war in Iraq began. Where are these pictures? Are they forbidden? What does it mean when the executive of a democratic nation precludes upsetting images from flowing into the public?

My thesis began as an interrogation aimed at discovering the methods undertaken by the Bush Administration to forbid pictures of coffins coming home from Iraq. When I learned about the Vietnam War in my classes, or discussed it with people who lived through that era, we always ended up talking about the damaging and complicated role of television in that war; many have called it “America’s First TV War.”\(^4\) I wondered if “Vietnam Syndrome” accounted for the current media restrictions, and I questioned if this process was original to the Iraq War. Yet even before I began researching specific Pentagon rulings, I recognized a faulty method in the Bush Administration’s attempt to limit disturbing coverage. Despite the absence of coffins pictured on the front pages of newspapers, this has been an image-based war. In the early stages of planning my thesis, I listed the most important, or most media-covered events of the Iraq War; and I decided on the Abu Ghraib torture scandal, Saddam Hussein’s execution, and President Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” aircraft landing. These events, and their depiction, are crucial to my understanding of the narrative of the Iraq War.

While finishing my thesis, the nation observed (or didn’t) the five-year anniversary of the War in Iraq on March 19, 2008. Four days later, on March 23, the American death toll reached 4,000. Q. Where are these 4,000 bodies? A. Hidden.

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\(^4\) See Chapter 1; and also, Daniel Hallin, The “Uncensored War”: The Media and Vietnam. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
The last five years prove the skillful way the Bush Administration controlled the reporting of the war from the public. In order to grasp our own mortality, sometimes we need actually to see the loss of another’s life. The fragile human body has disappeared in the coverage of the current war. The erasure of American human life as depicted in American media does not rule out the representation of fallen or injured Iraqi, Terrorist, or Arab life in this war. A citizen who watches TV news, or reads mainstream newspapers, has probably seen an image of a suicide bombing in the last five years: chaos, glass, blood, and human carnage cover the streets, and in the background an unidentifiable object burns. This shows the viewer that that violence occurs, but over there. In the years following 9/11, Americans have encountered various images depicting grisly terrorist acts. Even though the Bush Administration limits traditional representations of fallen Americans in the media, such images arrived elsewhere: on the Internet.

My thesis concentrates on the history of war coverage, and the role of digital media in explaining our wars to the American public. In Chapter 1, I discuss the three stalwart networks of television news (or what I call L’Ancien Régime) that covered Vietnam; the emergence of CNN as the first 24-hour news network and its role in the Persian Gulf War; and the conflicting methods of traditional mainstream news versus those of Internet news, blogs, and other online sources in the Iraq War. These media moments serve to historically ground my discussion’s focus on the presentation of the war to the public, and what it means to bring foreign events into the domestic sphere. In Chapter 2, I produce a close reading of the images of Abu Ghraib, Saddam’s Hanging, and Mission Accomplished. I discuss the method in
which and by any means, which these events were mediated to the public, either through television, print, or the Internet, and how that affected the event’s perception. In Chapter 3, I analyze the current the paradigm of executive rule, borrowing Giorgio Agamben’s phrase, “The State of Exception.” Doing so allows me to explain the way George W. Bush’s presidency established a political hinterland to separate the War on Terror as distinct from all previous eras of America’s past. I relate the audacious character of his presidency that gave rise to independent citizen-journalists reporting on the Iraq War via private blogs and web-tools. By examining the role of particular images in this war, and their method of distribution, I explain the near impossibility for a government—even one as bent on executive control—to censor its citizen journalism, press, and especially Internet discourse in the 21st century.

I set out to write this thesis to put conceptual flesh on the more than 4,000 Americans bodies lost in this war. I discuss the role of images, bodies, and politics to show how individuals have been the de-individuated and thus turned into mere bodies lost in this war. We know that more than 4,000 Americans have died in this war, and I hope my thesis expresses the way in which the American public encounters other bodies, whether valorized or dehumanized, whether American or Iraqi, and who are all subjects of and subjected to the war in Iraq, as well as the larger implications for the War on Terror. I believe that the hypnotic visual effects of current television formats, coupled with the instant gratification inherent in the Internet, has produced a more apathetic and indeed “privatized” public. Strangely, the American public often reports of feeling “Iraq Fatigue,” caused by the negative media surrounding the war, even though the costs of this war remain distant and oblique. I question the role of
the media (both traditional journalists/broadcasters, and their online counterparts) in representing the war to the public. With the absence of coffins, how have these outlets discussed the costs of this war? What is the role of the blogger in negating the absolute power of government leaders? With the shifting advances in technology and the Internet in the 21st century, we do not know the way our national memory will be shaped in years to come. Through digital processing and communication, our memories, images, and personal narratives easily get shared and archived on the Internet. My generation trusts the Internet more than they do the 6:30 pm TV news broadcast. 9/11 and The War in Iraq bear out this observation. It’s still strange to palate, how I went through childhood in the seemingly peaceful decade of the 1990s. It is now 2008, and my country has been at war for seven years. My thesis is my personal and intellectual response to such developments.
Chapter 1

Competing Representations, Competing Realities:
Histories of Mediation in America’s Last Three Wars

I. Vietnam as a Catalyst for Changing Media Restrictions

What might does it mean that the American public can watch terrorist videos on YouTube, but is unable to see pictures of the soldiers’ coffins coming home from Iraq? I argue that the so-called “War on Terror” is as much a media, image, and narrative management campaign as it is an actual, historical and bloody one. It is the technologies of media and mediation that I wish to focus on in describing the horrors and the costs of war.

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The current War in Iraq comes out of a longer American tradition of how Americans consume our wars. Americans have depended on visual evidence to inform public opinion about their nation’s wars since the Civil War.\(^1\) In the Vietnam War, visual dependence entered the realm of television. The combat operations, treaties, and bombings in the wars that preceded Vietnam were summed up in succinct headlines and newspaper columns. In Vietnam this structure fell apart as Americans relied on TVs as their chief news source.\(^2\) In the 1960s, America transformed into a “televisual society,”\(^3\) decreasing the value of the morning newspaper and the subsequent afternoon edition. In Vietnam, war exploded into American living rooms nightly and the cultural effects of this new phenomenon appeared across America. For the first time, families watched war not on the silver screen, for example in a fictional format, but on the small screen at home in a format that promised to bring us the real thing. American families obsessively waited for news correspondents to deliver newscasts, not from a sanitary New York newsroom,

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3\(^{3}\) Connelley and Welch, 205-206.
but from an exotic corner of the world where young American men died daily in rice patties and in murky jungle battles. Vietnam changed the ways Americans consumed and perceived wars as Vietnam, and following wars, became defined by the images that came out of conflict zones, as if those images were in fact unmediated. In Vietnam, for the first time, war filled TV screens and forced the public to confront the costs of war.

By the time the Vietnam War broke out, the American public received their news from the major TV network’s evening broadcast. During the Vietnam era there was terse competition among news corporations, as only three TV networks contained news departments at the time: NBC, ABC, and CBS. This was the major medium of mass news and mass communication that formed and informed the viewing public. These networks established news bureaus in Saigon to deliver war coverage back to their allied bureaus in New York and/or Washington DC. Most of the reports on the war came from Saigon, rather than from the more exotic locales where the combat took place. Yet when violence occurred in Saigon itself, the news bureaus had the benefit of being present, camera-ready, and on the scene. The effects of broadcasting straight from Saigon could change the public’s opinion on the war in the 30-minute broadcast. In this way, the War in Vietnam demonstrated the American public’s deep fixation (and simultaneous revulsion) with watching military losses of life and limb on the television.

Conflict over how the war was mediated, or filmed and then brought to the family living room, came about when news networks established bureaus at the epicenter of war. The media and the military began, for the first time, to share one physical space, even while their presence in that space was for separate, and at times oppositional, purposes. Whereas the military operates under Washington policy, the press aims to inform the public, at times critically. Yet during Vietnam, the media and the military appeared to coalesce through TV newscasts. But this very coalescence also produced a kind of rupture in the relation between war and news.

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4 Connelley and Welch, 206.
5 In the Vietnam Era, “no newspaper in America was able to reach a national daily audience,” so, “the central news source for a national audience was evening news, for thirty minutes, five times a week.” Connelley and Welch, 206.
That is, the very combination of media and military during the Vietnam era produced a contradiction, or break, between war itself and those who fight it, and the civilians reporting on that war and those very same soldiers. Journalists, after all, not only seek to report accurate information, but also seek sellable stories and sellable images to give back to the network president, through whom such stories and images make their way onto our screens. It is reasonable to assume that the American military was unhappy with what they experienced as constant combat being edited into journalistic “pieces.” Such “pieces” were often made out of strategic, and often secretive, operations,\(^6\) which were then transformed for an image-and-story-consuming public. When cameramen and news correspondents captured the Tet Offensive in 1968, the citizens at home--allegedly served by the media--began to shrink from their public support for the war. In the eyes of the military and President Johnson, support for the war in Vietnam could have remained high, if it not for the penetrating lens of the network news henchmen.\(^7\) In this way--and in spite of the fact that the war was made into a consumable product--those “pieces” of the war that the public consumed were so disturbing that they shook public support for the war. The reports that appeared in 1968 showing the massacre at My Lai and the infamous execution, by gunpoint to the head, of a Vietcong man by a South Vietnamese military officer, were arguably the breaking point of public support. Public unease gave way to public disgust over the question of whether our soldiers were dying in as much glory as Washington wanted to portray.

\(^6\) “There was constant pressure for correspondents to justify their expenses and to produce newsworthy reports [that] had to be presented as in some way typical of what was happening.” Miles Hudson, and John Stanier. War and the Media: a Random Searchlight. New York: New York UP, 1998.

\(^7\) Connelley and Welch, 209.
The images that came out of the Vietnam War were different than the images of previous wars. TV cameras captured moving images, broadcasting the conflict in the form of daily updates. As media technology advanced rapidly, both censorship and the ethical standards of whistleblowers vied to keep up. News organizations grappled with what to censor and what to give to the public. Is it acceptable to
broadcast young Americans burning down Vietnamese villages? How much violence is too much violence to depict? Do these broadcasts protect or violate our freedom of speech? Do such broadcasts lead the public to identify with the views of a news anchor, diminishing their trust in Washington politicians? The incessant and increasing pulse of these newscasts often persuaded Americans at home to shape their opinions along similar lines as those of the nightly news anchor, who served as the focal point of identification for the viewer in most cases, such news anchors were skeptical, if not critical, of American progress in Vietnam. A new era in public opinion began when Walter Cronkite ended his broadcast from Saigon and uttered the phrase, “unwinable,” as the media-inundated public turned its back on the Vietnam War definitively. As more newscasts ended their broadcasts with colored footage of American flag-draped coffins boarding military planes heading home, Americans were forced to face the inescapable costs of the war in Vietnam, both in terms of the loss of American life and in terms of the destruction wrought by war in general. The images of so many of these coffins, filled with the fallen unnamed soldiers, forever changed the way Americans would consume wars. To consume war in this way was to consume images of death; the media was able to show how war, quite literally brought death home.

II. The Gulf War as a 24 Hour/Day Event

By the time the war in the Persian Gulf began in January 1991, the mutually empowering and mutually critical relationship between the military and the media had changed radically since the Vietnam era. Washington officials became wise in retrospect, attuned to the effect a critical media had in producing a critical, or at the very least, disgusted public. What changed in the decade and a half between the removal of American forces in Vietnam and the arrival of American forces in Kuwait? During this time, the U.S. played an important role in ending the rhetoric if not the (near-nuclear) reality of the Cold War. At the end of the Cold War, the U.S. re-emerged as the only global superpower, and gained back—at least in the

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perception of Washington—the same glory awarded to the United States after World War II. Again, the U.S. political and military establishments viewed the nation as absolutely unbeatable. For Washington, this meant that any future conflict absolutely necessitated that the Vietnam defeat not be repeated. The night before the bombing of Baghdad began, on January 16, 1991, President Bush addressed the nation from the Oval Office. During his address, the President assured a short war, limited casualties, and made a promise: “this will not be another Vietnam.” In this address, Bush and his speechwriters risked referencing the military debacle in Vietnam, yet they did so in an effort to unify Americans toward a military victory.

The advances made in TV news between the Vietnam War and the Gulf War motivated the policy makers in Bush’s cabinet to curtail media involvement. In their efforts, they realized that war must be the one commercial front to which the American public should not possess unbridled access. Washington became savvy to the fact that the success of future wars depended as much upon Madison Avenue as it did upon battlefield operations. Even if, Washington reasoned, a potential war were to go badly, it need not be depicted as such. Instead, the media might be used to drum up support for the war so as to enhance the military’s morale. This point of view, enshrined in memo Annex Foxtrot/Policy Oversight Materials for Operation Desert Shield, explicitly instructed what could and could not be mediated from the Persian Gulf to the Americans at home. Somewhere between the event and the representation of the event, the truth became elusive, flexible and debatable. In this way, Washington’s political and advertising elite began to filter, legitimate and forbid what the public could see. On the basis of such images, Washington insiders and network executives made flexible decisions about what a war is in terms of its televisual depiction. By reversing the power relationship between the reality of war and its representation, Washington “militarized” the media by turning it into a battlefield of competing opinions and images. In fact, it may not be the public’s role to judge at


all; politicians and military chiefs made it their occupation to form judgments based on their careful selections of images of war.

Following the American loss in Vietnam, Washington officials came to the conclusion that war, in its bloody, “natural” state, could and should go on apart from the direct presentation of images on the evening news. An abridged version of war news, edited by a handful of Washington’s and New York’s elite image and policy makers, became the new basis of the reception of war. The first President Bush employed a wartime tradition in which the commanders of a state attempt to separate the costs of the war from their citizens. If citizens do not recognize the losses at stake for their country, military and government leaders can rouse a stronger base of supporters for a war. A memo written on August 14, 1990 by Captain Ron Wildermuth, under the auspices of the military doctrine Annex Foxtrot, severely limited access normally granted to the press (both for print reporters and photo-journalists) to access the coffins of fallen military troops. By passing the act, the President selectively prohibits the dissemination of information to the public. In times of war, citizens accept that the era calls for sacrifice. These sacrifices can come in the form of giving up some first world luxuries, accepting in a weakened or less boisterous economy, or for soldier’s families, in the form of the loss of a loved one’s life. To make these sacrifices worthwhile, the Commander in Chief tends to articulate various gains the nation will earn upon the U.S. victory. President Bush garnered support for the Persian Gulf War under the premise to liberate Kuwait from Saddam Hussein. By using a traditionally liberal justification for the use of force in the Persian Gulf, which was conveyed by the President’s promise to ensure freedom to oppressed people, Bush treads dangerously close to the same reasons cited for entering Vietnam. In an attempt to dislocate American citizens from making this parallel, the President wooed the U.S. into complicity by means of a barrage of technological advancements.

The Gulf War signified a new era in broadcast journalism. By 1991, TV adapted new methods of production, perhaps from the influence of American pop

culture. The way that the Gulf War appeared on TV was similar to the music videos shown on MTV: ephemeral shots, quick edits, music sampling, disturbing faces and distracting graphics all resulted in a sensory overload which disrupted the viewer from gaining even a moderate, much less full understanding of what he or she saw on the television. In his provocative and illuminating essay, “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place,” Jean Baudrillard argues the scant “war-ness” evidence of the Persian Gulf War. Without combat zones, without ground troops, and without a traditional war front to fight, President George H.W. Bush and his officials substituted the simulacrum of war for the event itself, perhaps best emblematized by the green night-vision crosshair target lock coming from warplanes, followed by a ground-level explosion. In early 1990s TV production, videographics appeared all through the television market, and the media’s coverage of the Gulf invasion was no exception. As Andrew Hoskins writes, “Videographics helped to convey an unreal (and highly sanitized) war.”12 During the invasion and throughout the short war, “The CNN effect” combined the abilities of the 24-hour cable news with real-time reporting to bring the public a live and mostly unedited picture of the war. CNN was the only news network that reported directly from Baghdad. On the first night of the aerial bombing, CNN reporters Peter Arnett, Bernard Shaw, and John Holliman broadcast from the Al-Rashid hotel in downtown Baghdad. The broadcast consisted of their voices playing over a graphic map of Iraq. In the background of the reports the audience could hear explosions and see some sparks of anti-aircraft artillery. These moments were explained in equally spectacular terms by the reporters: “The relationship constructed between the here-and-now (the shared studio space with presenter and audience) and the there-and-now (the desert of the Middle East),” were understood through, “the televisual apparatus of time.”13 The Pentagon and the Cable News Network cooperated in the Gulf War such that the former could use TV to represent war in a cohesive, spectacular and yet sanitized way; so that the latter could exist in public consciousness as a major distributor of breaking news.

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12 Hoskins, 28.
13 Hoskins, 27.
Under the first George Bush Administration, the Department of Defense, and the Fourth Estate alike considered the mistakes made in Vietnam, and applied those lessons to the Gulf War. The press understood that their reports could possibly sway public opinion. On the first night of the war, the CNN correspondents represented the war to the homeland by way of personally narrating what they saw on the ground. At one point in the CNN broadcast Peter Arnett asks, “Can you hear us in Atlanta?” thus (re)presenting the war in Baghdad as a virile attack of American munitions, where the reporters found themselves grounded on the frontline of the aerial assault. Without visual evidence of the war, the reporters could more easily insert themselves into the space of the broadcast. The correspondents made the war into a spectacular event by explaining it as a sight only they beheld, and as a subject they could broadcast to the rest of America. The Bush Administration and the Pentagon granted CNN and other news networks a deluge of “interviews,” but Baudrillard rightly doubts the Truth in of any such interviews. When we blot out citations to an actual war, the unmitigated disaster arises in its place: journalistic talking heads commenting on a war devoid of war-ness. Media executives learned from Vietnam that an overload of visuals in news segments tended to convey the negative aspects of war. In this way, the heads of media companies followed the orders of Policy Annex Foxtrot when they tried to avoid repeating the Vietnam syndrome by replacing bald visuals with talking-heads commentators. News reports repeatedly discussed the technological advancements the U.S. possessed over the Iraqis. Not only was the U.S. military dependent on technological advances, but CNN as well threaded videographics into much of its war reporting. The absence of “war-ness” and the abundance of videographics seemed to say that when all military options fail there, insert the post-modern drabble of news pundits here.

The substitution for quantity over quality worked seamlessly in the Gulf War. The Bush team promised a “soft war,” one dominated by American technological strengths over Saddam’s military. Bush’s administration managed to construct a war

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16 Hoskins, 16.
in which the Real (the costs of war) vanished into the Virtual (the images which help define a war) with the advance made by the first 24-hour news network, CNN. Bush officials appeared on all the newscasts and berated the compliant TV news anchors with their promises for a quick aerial fight, limited ground troops, and a predestined success. The Gulf War began *en media res* for where the Cold War left off:

American industrial strengths, weaponry, and news networks, face no enemy whom they cannot defeat. When Americans begin to watch war in lieu of their evening sitcom, they will ask for the same sort of entertainment value entrenched in a network’s primetime lineup. Handsome news correspondents, savvy pyrotechnics, and 21st century technology placate this desire. In an attempt to dislocate the events taking place in the Persian Gulf, news networks substituted the images of fallen soldiers with highly entertaining, over-produced journalistic “pieces.” That these events only slightly inform the public continues to buttress Washington’s modus operandi.

Why did the Gulf War run so smoothly as an image campaign? Policy makers in Washington came away from Vietnam determined not to let the mistakes of their past daunt future possibilities. A leitmotif of the war in Vietnam became “The Jungle,” a shadowy no man’s land, where the enemies looked curiously akin to the allies; a war that rendered the combat fields of the World Wars futile. So instead of a critical cultural analysis that might have averted a U.S. failure, the army boarded war boats, traveled upstream, and fought a sloppy, and mismanaged fight in the depths and thickness of flora and fauna. During the Gulf War, the Department of Defense attempted to control the images of war that were transmitted to the public. If our enemies in Vietnam remained unclear, even to the men enlisted, the Gulf War needed to operate with absolute certainty. How did the military ensure such success? Combine our unparalleled military strength with the “grotesque vaudeville”17 enemy of Saddam Hussein, and no more will Americans question, “What are we fighting for?” as the images speak for themselves. The uncensored broadcasts of Vietnam occurred by accident, as far as Washington’s upper echelon was concerned. The year 1991 brought retrospect and wisdom to policymaking and public mediation: the press

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17 Baudrillard, 25.
coverage of Desert Storm appeared brief, complete, and linear. Unlike the middling quagmire of Vietnam, U.S. efforts in the Gulf War possessed a single purpose and were accomplished with assured speed. If the Pentagon boasted supreme military strength during the Persian Gulf War, TV news also made technological advancements worth praising. With the advent of 24-hour news, Americans suddenly possessed the ability to obsess over news media as the TV nightly newscast turned into hourly reports. The Pentagon duly noted the changes in American popular culture, observing the differences between the American TV audience of 1991 and their predecessors who watched Walter Cronkite broadcast from Vietnam. The military document Annex Foxtrot attempted to limit media access to war coverage. Richard “Dick” Cheney, as the Defense Secretary under President George H.W. Bush, commented in 1991, "There's a huge gaggle of reporters out there, and the press has absolutely no capacity to police itself." And so with the foresight of Annex Foxtrot, military spokespeople invited reporters to speak with designated military P.R., rather than find and report their own stories from the war zone. The reporters stationed in the Middle East learned to graciously accept invitations to embed with military units. Consider this phrase literally: as reporters getting into bed with and thus being close with rather than critical of the military and its viewpoint. Reporters partook in the government’s process of displacing the visual costs of war to the public; if the reporters wanted to cover the Gulf War, they could only report on the stories they could access. Under the restrictions of the Pentagon, reporters pictured a publicly readable war defined by night-vision aerials, the Pentagon’s graphics of new weaponry, and live broadcasts. This limited rendering of the Gulf War turned a volatile world conflict into a smoothly super-mediated primetime event.

The combined effects of Annex Foxtrot, and the innovation of 24-hour news networks helped create an American public obsessed with “Breaking News;” a public that readily accepts their addiction to television-talking-head-infotainment. In the beginning hours of infinite newscasts, news producers confronted the intimidating

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task of filling the news hour with new news. A successful method of turning out
original news updates came from collaborating with Pentagon officials. In “The Gulf
War Did Not Take Place,” Baudrillard writes that the blending of the Real into the
Virtual comes across clearly in the hyper-televised aspects of the Gulf War, as
Western audiences “swallow the deception and remain fascinated by the evidence of
the montage of this war with which we are inoculated everywhere.”¹⁹ The news
media wanted to impress upon its 1991 audience the MTV-ness of war coverage.
War became hip. By filling newscasts with images of weaponry over images of the
war on the ground, military officials led by the legislation of Annex Foxtrot,
successfully dislocated the costs of the war for Americans. Baudrillard writes that
Americans were, “stupefied […] by the sinister insignificance of the images,”²⁰
during Gulf War coverage, but complacently accepted the broadcasts nonetheless.
The advancements of 24-hour news media mischievously tricks the audience to
believe that “Live” broadcasts bring the viewer closer to the event; yet in the
“production of news,” the audience has been obfuscated by the event, as neither the
Real nor the Truth exist in the face of the Virtual. With the passage of Annex
Foxtrot, the media operated under a truncated or severely narrowed version of the
First Amendment. In order not to let the lore of war sway public opinion, Pentagon
officials wanted the graphics of destruction to stand for themselves without the
interpolation of the press. Under the stronghold of Annex Foxtrot, limited media
access regurgitated skewed events to the public and let such “events” stand in for
actual war occurrences.

The substitution of the quantity of videographics over quality, that is critical,
journalism worked seamlessly in the first Gulf War. The first Bush team promised a
“soft war,” dominated by “smart bombs,” which would defeat Saddam’s conventional
military. By combining the lessons of two different wars, the George H.W. Bush
administration constructed a narrative that revived the World War II military
superiority complex with lessons learned from our Vietnam humiliation. The
Department of Defense released images to news network to depict our sophisticated

¹⁹ Baudrillard, 68.
²⁰ Baudrillard, 51.
military. By inhibiting the media’s free coverage of the war, President George H.W. Bush and the Department of Defense ensured that as far the media was concerned, the U.S. could not lose. In this way, the reality on the ground is far less relevant than the signals being sent through undersea cables, airwaves, and space satellites. President George H.W. Bush understood the effect to which the public comprehended war through televisual representation, and how images of war encountered a public litmus test, rather than undergoing judgments made by individuals. With the advent of “live” images, Americans believed that they were watching the Real Thing on TV, while the content and form of the images negated such a Realness value. Televisual information claims to present Real events; yet TV news production places a select aspect of visual information into its broadcasts, as virtual news begins to stand in for the Real. The effect of the Gulf War’s televisual imagery hypnotized the public into a positive public opinion on the war. After all, such imagery suggests that if war looked as spectacularly fascinating as it did on TV, then surely it must be working.


22 “Informational events […] are endemic to postmodern life. Since they are by definition always open to interpretation, they may be made to serve a variety of political ends. They are an important vector of power. What matters is to control the production and meaning of information in a given context.” In The Gulf War did not take place, introduction by Paul Patton, 12-13.
III. The Digital War and the Fall of L’Ancien Régime

The uncensored broadcasts of Vietnam occurred almost by accident, and Washington’s upper echelon could neither dictate nor control their dissemination, much less offer competing views through comparable mass media outlets. The year 1991 brought hindsight and wisdom to policymaking and the mediation of the war to the public: the press coverage of Desert Storm was brief, complete, and linear. Unlike the quagmire of Vietnam, U.S. efforts in Iraq I possessed a single purpose and would be accomplished with assured speed. The Pentagon duly noted the changes in American popular culture, observing the statistical differences between the American television audiences of 1991 and their predecessors who watched Walter Cronkite broadcast from Vietnam. Due to the restrictions put in place by Annex Foxtrot, reporters stationed in the Persian Gulf could only speak to select military personnel. Annex Foxtrot, published by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in March 1990, aimed to “provide the media access to cover U.S. military operations to the maximum degree possible consistent with mission security and safety of US forces.”23 This document states the Pentagon’s initiative to bolster the safety of the military at the expense of the journalists’ First Amendment rights. The widely acknowledged effects of this policy turned the war into a TV-friendly event, and it also censored the images and stories that came out of the Gulf War. TV news coverage, rampant with night-vision aerials of targets being destroyed without any sense or image of loss of actual life, Pentagon sanctioned graphics of precision-guided munitions (“smart bombs”), and news anchors’ commentary invaded American bedrooms, begging citizens to accept the widely circulated stories and images that boasted an inevitable success for the war.

If Vietnam showcased the costs of war unabashedly, and the Gulf War attempted to censor the mediation of the war to the public, then the 21st Century war in Iraq shows the ways in which President George W. Bush’s defense secretaries and image consultants took this logic to its extreme in working to produce an image and thus a public-friendly war. In order for a president who wishes to avoid and minimize

opposition when he beats the drums for battle, and for this to come to fruition, he organizes a team that must construct a satisfying vision of war. The accepted idea behind George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq was the way his cabinet sold the U.N., the United States Congress, and a plurality of American citizens into believing that Saddam Hussein shared “links” with the terrorist organization Al Qaeda as well as that Iraq possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction. When National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice appeared on CNN she pressed urgently to invade Iraq in famously saying that, “We do not want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.”

By granting such interviews, the second Bush Administration used disquieting language and the specter of atomic horror to gain public support for the war. In the months leading up to the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, the President tapped into the idea that Americans glean much of their world opinion from the images broadcast by their TVs. The George W. Bush Administration understood that if it wanted a publicly supported war, they would first need the support of news anchors. George W. Bush’s defense team believed that by catering to the public and delivering interviews to the mainstream media, they might achieve nearly unanimous support from the public. The George W. Bush administration saw the first Gulf War (from a PR standpoint) as a success, hardly noting room for improvement. But what the second Bush team failed to recognize, much in the same vein of the military officials in Vietnam who neglected to censor the TV access to the war, is that generations often define themselves by their technological advancements and differences from previous generations. So as the first bombs dropped in “shock and awe” over Baghdad in March 2003, Bush officials forgot about the power and multiplicity of 21st century voices that were carried by a new medium: the Internet.

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24 It is worth considering in what ways presidential administrations give interviews to media sources, and debrief the press pool. In the months leading up to the American 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Bush Administration took into account how citizens sharpen their worldview by the way TV news packages world events. American media brings world events from Other regions of the world into a domesticated space. Literally, the news is often watched in a household; but media operators domesticate news in the way world events come together in a TV broadcast through a lens of American policy, and its effects on American society.

The strategists behind the War in Iraq face a new, modern, multidirectional and multiplicitious oppositional front. Administration officials lead the public to believe Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups are the biggest detractors to American security and unity, but that pronouncement underscores the oppositional voices of the Internet. From Vietnam, Washington learned that military officials and strategists inside the Presidential Cabinet needed to compete with media representations of the conflict by disseminating their own images of war. In the Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush’s team practically sold the news coverage to CNN by granting that network special insider status, thus allowing CNN to propagate Pentagon-sanctioned-graphics, materials, and live broadcasts. But on September 12, 2001, when George W. Bush insiders began to look for connections between Saddam, Al Qaeda, and weapons of mass destruction, perhaps they neglected to take into account the dramatic and rapid ways in which media had changed since the end of the Gulf War. In this way, President George W. Bush has acted arguably more like President Johnson or President Nixon, both of whom underestimated the ways in which the press and media technology resonates and flows throughout the culture. With immense changes in the dissemination and proliferation of information that came with the rise of the Internet, news coverage became democratized for any class of person who had access to a computer and a connection to the World Wide Web. In Vietnam, three news channels covered the war. In the Gulf War, CNN took charge as the first 24-hour news network. By the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom, limitless news outlets portrayed the war using their own imagery, idiom and dialogue. The inundation of new voices on the Internet directly conflicts with the extreme top-down executive power that the cabinet of President George W. Bush to this day attempts to maintain.

The era in American history where families sat down to watch the three TV networks’ 6:30 PM broadcast ended sometime in the early 21st century. It may have been 9/11, or it might have been the worst natural disaster in the country’s history, Hurricane Katrina, but somewhere in the first eight years of the 21st century America went digital. Indeed the news networks broadcast damaging images during the Vietnam War, but these images were read in the American consciousness as images
of limited supply. The disturbing images of Vietnam reached the public through the 6:30 broadcast, or the morning paper. In the Internet Age, images proliferate second by second, allowing users to search for images on their own schedule and in their own terms. The Washington Post media reporter Howard Kurtz takes note of this phenomenon as he “conclud[es] that the [6:30] newscasts had little to offer me that I couldn’t get, in timelier and more compelling fashion, elsewhere.” The burgeoning industry of Internet news demonstrates another trend of media in the 21st century: niche markets. Audiences no longer exist passively, taking in world headlines as they sit complacent in front of their television. Today, news seekers play an active and agential role as they search for news from sources as disparate as Rush Limbaugh, Air America, The Drudge Report or The Huffington Post. The critical participation of audiences changes how we shape individual memory of the Iraq War. Instead of the TV spewing images and the anchor shaping them into the national narrative for the war, individual citizens gather images that they find through their own Internet searches. This democratizes the Internet and grants power to individual citizens who, depending on what they infer from their Internet searches, can or cannot continue to listen to the government’s much less the TV’s Iraq War narrative.

As the Internet continues to change the way American citizens understand world politics and American society, TV tries to adapt and adopt these changes for purposes of producing technologically shrewd, event Internet-like TV programs. Reality TV historically parallels the rise of bloggers, as Americans have begun to feel that traditional celebrities and journalists no longer represent the concerns of a unitary public. News networks changed their broadcasting template before the invasion of Iraq to incorporate the societal effects of Internet/21st century culture. Even before the military strikes began, news networks managed to turn an imminent invasion into a consumable primetime TV show. On the eve of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, news networks embellished their graphic-throttled screens with phrases such as “Operation Iraqi Freedom,” “The Countdown to Invasion,” and the “48 Hour Countdown,” referring to the opportunity President Bush gave Saddam Hussein to flee before the

26 Howard Kurtz, Reality Show: Inside the Last Great Television News War (New York: Free Press, 2007) X.
27 Kurtz, xiii.
Americans invaded. TV screens flickered with American flags while replaying recycled images of Saddam Hussein thrusting a rifle into the air. The effects of the seductive editing and emblazoned graphics once again championed Washington’s bottom line on war coverage: dislocate the public from the actual costs of war (deaths, destruction, despair) and give the American audience pseudo-events in return, i.e. “a CNN exclusive” aerial shot of U.S. stealth jets bombarding the Iraqi capital. A curious theme of reprocessed Gulf War imagery played into the Operation Iraqi Freedom coverage, and this “recycling” also describes Washington’s planning of the war in Iraq. By reusing Gulf War imagery, the audience accepted the familiar landscape and Saddam as “World Target” rhetoric. Thus the popular opinion in America moved to wage a new war using the principles that were used to defend the Gulf War in 1991. The idea that we knew the Iraqi landscape and understood the rule of Saddam Hussein as a vicious one in terms of recycled and remembered images suggests that the years between the Gulf War and the Iraq War acted only as an intermission, and many in the American public expected a return or completion of that earlier war. The mass-communicative effects of TV suggest that we carry around cultural and historical memories through what the TV captures. When Iraq re-emerged on our TV screens in 2003, we expected it, even desired it, our cultural conditioning already informing us in how to read Saddam Hussein/Iraq as our monolithic enemy. We represent the past in our minds to simulate what we see on TV, or on our computer screens. We carry around these images in our heads like flickering TV bites or Internet pop-up ads.

The same images of Saddam that appeared on news shows in 1991 returned to air in 2003; the despotic leader worked perfectly as the Machiavellian dictator and the

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28 In *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Jean Baudrillard discusses the way media images dislocate the sights of war and in return, attempt to derive meaning from a bombardment of quick-shot images, “Abolish any intelligence of the event. The result is a suffocating atmosphere of deception and stupidity. And if people are vaguely are of being caught up in this appeasement and this disillusion by images, they swallow the deception and remain fascinated by the evidence of the montage of this war with which we are inoculated everywhere: through the eyes, the sense and in discourse.” 68.

29 Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) “[I]n the age of bombing, the world has also been transformed into – is essentially conceived and grasped as- a target.” 32. The memory of the Gulf War loomed in the imaginations of many Americans before we invaded Iraq in 2003. This points to the easy process that Americans undertook in re-picturing Saddam as the nation’s enemy (and thus target), by combining his image as a merciless dictator in 1991, with the 21st century alleged-nuclear terrorist in 2003.
metaphysics of good versus evil were revived. Just as the architects of Operation Iraqi Freedom recycled Saddam imagery from the Persian Gulf War, many military elite under the first President Bush found their way into the second Bush cabinet. Notably, Dick Cheney, appointed by George H.W. Bush as the Secretary of Defense, now appeared in the role of the Vice President for George W. Bush; Colin Powell, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for George H.W. Bush, was now the U.S. Secretary of State. Both of these men were integral planners of the Gulf War. George W. Bush’s team worked hard to construct an entirely new narrative of our reasons for invading Iraq in 2003. They alleged if the U.S. did not take immediate action, then Saddam and his “cohorts” in Al Qaeda were poised to attack the U.S. again whether on the mainland or by proxy. As opposed to the caves and mountains of Pakistan where Bin Laden most probably found refuge, Saddam’s territory was both easily definable and locatable, providing multiple military targets. Streets all over Baghdad boasted his name, murals and statues acclaimed his glory. To annihilate the “other” we first must conceive of and visualize him, and as Al Qaeda’s nebulous whereabouts continued to dissatisfy the quest of George W. Bush’s cabinet, the justification for pushing forward and removing Saddam appeared all the more certain. In war, we often wage on a metaphysical alterity, such as “evil.” A public will more easily support a war if there are images to depict a distinct and geographically situated threat that gives “body” to such alterity.

George W. Bush’s administration reshapes war strategies of the past to articulate our current reason for occupying Iraq. The effect of publicizing the endless stream of coffins coming home from war remains one of the most haunting images of Vietnam. President George H.W. Bush managed a war his son must envy, for as the Gulf War lasted six months with 300 American soldiers killed, Operation Iraqi Freedom has lasted five years, and more than 4,000 American troops have died. George W. Bush also did not enjoy near the level of international support and cooperation as did his father. In the months leading up to the invasion of Baghdad, President George W. Bush’s cabinet promised a swift victory; that Iraqis would

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30 Paul Virilio as quoted in Rey Chow’s, *The Age of the World Target*, 32, “For men at war, the function of the weapon is the function of the eye.” (30 in Chow, quotes from Virilio’s *War and Cinema*)
perceive Americans as liberators, and that coalition forces knew where to find the weapons of mass destruction. In the five years that have passed since March 2003, the Bush team continually has backtracked its rationale for invading, and revises then repeats the reasons for which the U.S. must stay committed to victory. The reason America originally went to Iraq has been lost, and politicians and military officials who continue to support the war, in effect say in 2008, “Well, whatever reason we went there, we’re here now, so we have to deal with it.”31 White House Press Secretaries continually change the rhetoric behind America’s reasoning for occupying Iraq. At first the U.S. pressed into the Gulf Region to find weapons of mass destruction. When it materialized that Saddam did not actually possess the stockpiles, the rhetoric then focused on the removal of the Husseins and the Baath Party. On December 14th of 2003 when America and its allies accomplished that objective, only to open up the Pandora’s box of Post-Saddam sectarian Iraq. Since the removal of the Baathist Regime, new articulations come forth from the Bush administration to legitimize their mission. These articulations change periodically. The contemporary presidential rhetoric informs the public that the military needs to stay in Iraq to bring liberty and freedom, to promote democracy around the world, to stabilize the entire region, and by succeeding in Iraq we thus make the U.S. safer. No matter how the Administration wishes to construct reasons to stay in Iraq, very few signs show a blooming democratic future for either Iraq or its neighbors.

The power of the nightly news broadcast, a mainstay in American popular culture since the birth of television, lost its omnipotent power with continuous online news updates. The old media, or what I call L’Ancien Régime of media, fell apart when news coverage transformed in the digital sphere, “[a]s [traditional network news] struggled to carve out a comfortable niche, the evening newscasts tried to lift a page from their new-media competitors.”32 Suddenly, competing realities dispersed into the public sphere, in similar ways the TV disarticulated the Real from

32 Kurtz, 101.
Representation. The ways the public conceived of itself in all regards changed with the advent of the Internet. With the Internet, with digital photography, with technological advancements on many levels, including the cell phone camera, limitless representations of reality emerge and often conflict with Bush’s construction of the war. Similar to his father’s movement of Annex Foxtrot, George W Bush reinstated a policy to curtail media access to coffins coming home from Iraq. In paragraph 11(a) of IAW Change 3, Department of Defense Directive 5122.5 the “Names, video, identifiable written/oral descriptions or identifiable photographs of wounded service members will not be released without the service member’s prior written consent.”33 In the same ways that President Johnson was unable to perceive the effects that TV journalists might have on his war, it seems that the second President Bush never considered the effects of what might leak out over the Internet in place of sequestered coffins. The images that arise in a Post-Modern mediatized public sphere disrupt the linear narrative of the George W. Bush Administration, which suggested that we would invade, spread democracy, and reign victorious without disruption. Bush’s team wants to present the War in Iraq as a clearly outlined battle: held together by morals and military strategies. Never does Bush’s team present an option for anything but Victory. In our age, however, one repeatedly questions Bush’s logic when so many representations of this war conflict with the simplistic story of good versus evil he wants the American public to believe much as they would believe in religion.

Despite the administration’s attempt to curtail imagery depicting fallen soldiers and wounded men in Iraq, troubling images do arise through various sources. The War in Iraq now claims more than 4,000 American lives, and national newspapers remain reluctant to display such unsettling images on their front pages. Yet an individual with an Internet connection can search and subsequently access a superabundance of unsettling images online. The administration wants to continue to attract public support for the war not by entirely removing the public from images and images from the public, but through the promotion of specific, nationalist and

sanctioned images of a strong military and proud presidential administration. The administration attempts to prohibit the images of fallen soldiers, and in doing so we Americans lose for a second time the bodies of those who already died for the country. Without a pictorial representation of the fallen Americans in Iraq, we remain immune and inured to the human costs of war. The number 4,000 sprawled across newspapers, websites, and TV broadcasts (within a week of the five-year anniversary of the war) served to bring Americans’ attention to the 4,000th killed American soldier in Iraq. The number, “4,000,” means close to nothing for most Americans. It is in many ways a virtual than real phenomenon. Without mainstream media circulating images of fallen soldiers and/in their coffins the number 4,000 remains theoretical rather than refer to the reality of 4,000 dead bodies, not to mention thousands more that live in a physically and mentally maimed state. Certainly the directives mandated by the Pentagon separate the public from the unfriendly and even brutal images that define war. TV newscasts also decide to keep their airwaves free of representations of death. But many Americans know these images exist. It is only a matter of whether independent sources, ones unaffiliated with the corporate or traditional news structure, posting their images on the Internet. By means of the technology of such news sources a different narrative starts unfold about the status and role of America in Iraq. Competing realities have emerged in tandem with competing representations. It would be anti-democratic to stop the free-flow of speech and proliferation of representation. Does this matter in the War on Terror? In lieu of occluded images of flag-draped coffins, other wanton images have surfaced, exposing the sinister impulses that often accompany them.
Chapter 2

Under Control?
How America Learns About the War in Iraq

I. Prostitution of Images: Torture at Abu Ghraib

CBS News first brought the infamous photographs of Abu Ghraib to the American public. After the original broadcast on Sixty Minutes II on April 28, 2004, the photographs soon appeared in newspapers, magazines, and online news sites worldwide. The American public did not want to accept what these photographs seemed to symbolize: a complete perversion of American military power. The Army requires its soldiers to obey a code of ethics, yet the emergence of the Abu Ghraib scandal placed such ideals at risk. At both rhetorical and institutional levels, the military seeks to inform civilians that the Armed Forces defend America at home by defending democracy worldwide. At the popular level, advertisements designed to entice new recruits picture the ideal army man (or woman) as having rock-like strength, dignity, and perseverance. The release of the Abu Ghraib images put the entire relation of the public to the military in a precarious position. In this way these photos are reminiscent of 1968, when Americans radically questioned the alleged integrity of military structures following the My Lai Massacre.

The current Bush administration had constructed a narrative that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were necessary to defend our homeland; such a narrative largely went unquestioned at a mass level until the leak of these photos. Their release put the entire undertaking in peril. The Abu Ghraib photos symbolize the worst fears of

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American power run amok: perversion, sexual exploitation, a lack of the very rules defining military activity, and a complete ignorance for another culture’s values, bodies and boundaries. Indeed, the photos put profane images on display and thus revealed the ways in which systematic human ignorance, audacious abuses of power, and a disdain for the Iraqis are symptomatic of both American culture and the hierarchal structure of the recent configuration of the American military.

The most widely circulated images show Iraqi prisoners handcuffed, naked, and in extremely demeaning poses. The images received immediate negative publicity, and the Bush Administration, famous for keeping military details undisclosed at all times, unwillingly held a press conference on April 30, 2004—less than 48 hours after the leak on CBS News. President Bush shared the public’s “disgust” at the emergence of the photographs and assured that, “[the Iraqi’s] treatment does not reflect the nature of the American people.” In so responding, Bush effectively stated that the images represented a specific and indeed local transgression on the part of a few tainted soldiers, rather than characteristics of the American military—much less a vertical or top-down institutional directive to mistreat prisoners. That is, the problem is neither with America, Americans, the administration, nor the military, but with a few defective individuals. In this manner, Bush distanced the Department of Defense, and thereby his own branch of government, from the supposedly few individual perpetrators of the scandal. As such, he avoided investigation for the scandal, and escaped culpability.

In the weeks following the April 30th press conference, evidence surfaced that fissured Bush’s argument. General Richard Myers, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, originally denied his knowledge of the abuse at Abu Ghraib and claimed that the Pentagon was searching up and down the chain of command for anyone involved in the issuance of torture orders. However, it was General Myers who asked CBS News to postpone the initial airing of their segment on the torture scandal. The military was in full damage control mode much in the same way they were after reeling from the realization that images had the power to sway public opinion after Vietnam. CBS only decided to air the piece once the network learned that The New Yorker planned to run a story on the scandal in its upcoming issue. Though CBS willingly “sat on the story for two weeks at the Pentagon’s request,” the competition from another news outlet inspired the network to air the exposé. The network anticipated a public uproar stemming from the release of the photographs. Before considering the mass effects of the publication of the photographs, we must consider the technological medium of the images themselves.

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The way to begin thinking about the Abu Ghraib scandal must come from an analysis of the medium of the photographs: digital images. The change from film development to digital photography made photography a tool for the middle classes. Up until the 19th century, when Daguerreotypes appeared as the first commercially available photographic process, portraiture existed as a status symbol for the elite classes. Photography changed the conception of how images could be captured, and

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4 Rajiva, 12.
now digital photography has changed the way people take photographs. Some of the first processes of photography involved hours of sitting for a picture, and then of weeks waiting for the photo to be developed. Thus, up until the 21st century when digital photography became widely available, the possible loss of the image itself loomed over every unexposed frame. That is, a roll could be deliberately destroyed, become exposed to light at the improper stage, or could be processed and returned underdeveloped. With digital photography, the potential possibility for loss was replaced by endless possibility to proliferate images.

The digital camera has changed the way our society conceives of photography altogether: the advent of digital photography changed the craft from a restricted medium to one available to the middle classes. Before the digital camera, the gratification of looking at imagery spread through the social body at a slower pace. A significant lapse of time ensued from the moment that the picture was taken to the final photograph and it was not always known whether the subject would ever see himself in the image. The irreconcilable break in time between capturing the photograph and its development thus distanced the subject from the pictured event. By the time either the photographer or the subject of the photograph held the image in his or her hand, a flood of memory, burdened with problems of temporality, attached itself to the photo as a cogent trace of a past event. In Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes compares observing a picture to a visual representation of one’s own eulogy. He insists that “Death is the eidos of that Photograph,”5 and by holding photographs in his hand he thus holds “the return of the dead.”6 In a similar way, Susan Sontag

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5 Barthes, 15.
6 Barthes, 9.
notes in *On Photography*, “A photograph is both a pseudo-presence and a token of absence.” 7 Each of these theorists asserts there is a haunting absence of presence in photographic images because they represent a reality that at one time existed but is no longer present. The technological advancement from the filmic development of photography to digital photography changed this hypothetical essence of photographic images. Under the digital order, the historicity of photographs has come into question. A digital image can represent events as recent as a few moments ago. Digital representation thus changes the status of time.

Another difference between film photography and digital is the reference point of the photograph. During the first century of photography, the photograph stood for a completed past event. With the digital medium, the image captured can refer back to merely seconds before, made possible with the instant image-review in most digital cameras. Digital photography works as follows: one points or frames the subject on a digital camera, clicks the trigger, 8 and immediately turns the camera around such that the photographer (and also the subject, if the subject is a person) experience the immediacy of the image. It seems as if the image no longer acts as a eulogy for the past. The digital image captures a moment in the midst of its happening. That the digital photograph refers to an event, person, or place in one’s immediate presence obscures the image’s timeliness: it seems of the present, but can

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7 Sontag, 16.
8 “Any photographs that seek to identify a target, such as military reconnaissance photographs, operate according to the same general logic [to facilitate the arrest of their referent].” Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) 7. Photography seeks to capture a subject in a way similar to an assassination. The capturing of an image frames a subject in the same fashion a sniper uses: waiting for the moment when the subject arrives in clear view for an unobstructed shot, for either the lens, or for a gun.
occur forever,\(^9\) and for so many viewers, in a way that film photography never could.

In film photography, the photograph can literally be destroyed. In the digital medium, the annihilation of the image seems nearly impossible.

The proliferation of imagery made possible in the digital medium has yet to enter a seriously critical place in contemporary dialogue. The public presumes the digital camera to be another computerized device that improves 21\(^{st}\) century culture. Many Americans take their digital cameras with them wherever they go, and the public may not consider the consequences inherent to recording daily events. In digital photography, the photographs possess a slightly menacing nature. That is, the deceptive nature of the digital realm is that few people recognize the sinister aspects of digital photography. Due to the prevalence of digital camera, webcams, social networking, and mobile phones, a “plugged-in” individual is never quite alone. In the many ways that technologies seemingly improve quality of life, these advancements also have a dark underbelly, one that our culture only occasionally acknowledges. Internet predators receive attention on TV news, but fewer stories discuss negative repercussions of someone who photographs illicit events. Because the digital camera has become such a mundane item, our culture overlooks its sinister potential. It can capture events that might normally transpire between private parties. Sex, drugs, or abusive fetishes: in the past these acts were made public only under unusual circumstances. In digital photography, images often stay in the digital realm, either on a memory card or on a hard-drive, rather than go through traditional photo

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\(^9\) Digital photography can occur ‘forever’ in the way we share digital photography over the Internet. Once an image uploads onto a website, the digital image stays can potentially stay online, or pass through emails, forever. Digital images have repercussions beyond the immediate effect of the captured moment.
processing. The combination of the ease with which one can delete a digital photo, and the immediateness inherent to digital photography, makes it harder for people to consider the consequences of recording all actions, parties, and events in which one takes part. Though a human agent originally takes the photograph, as soon as the image gets recorded on a data chip or is uploaded onto the computer, it exists in a highly communicable form: the images can pass from one machine to another instantly. At this point, once the image makes it onto the hard drive, and then onto the next stage where it appears attached to an email message, the image exists as a digital specter: illuminating a life that no longer is.

Various Internet websites where one can share digital imagery highlight the almost endlessly reproducible nature of 21st century photography. Though a hard drive might crash, the digital image in an email, or published to a website, can stay on the Internet forever; digital photos remain publishable in many formats. The evolution of exchange in photographs, once restricted to the passage from a photographer/human agent to another human subject, has changed. Now the mediation of images occurs through one machine to another, and can emerge in print form on any home printer. Another strange characteristic of digital media is the young age of the industry, and often, the young as of the consumers as well. Its

users witness the industry’s mass potential for development and become more sophisticated producers and disseminators of cultural media, including images.

Despite the large percentage of Americans who use digital media and technology in their daily lives, does the population understand how the technology works? An even smaller percentage of the computer-literate population knows how to erase photographs from the digital atmosphere. For most Internet laypeople images remain in the servers of email accounts and hard drives and can thus be accessed indefinitely.

The cultural-technological changes from the photographic to the digital medium suggest that the latter is both immediate (as opposed to delayed) and endlessly and instantaneously reproducible (as opposed to technically reproducible but more limited in that capacity). The digital medium in which torture at Abu Ghraib was represented heavily influenced how the narrative itself unfolded. Put another way, the nature of the medium shaped the stories told about the events themselves.

Something of a minor cottage industry has developed around discussion of how the immediacy of 21st century technology has changed the way we communicate. The media industry, too, currently finds itself in a transformative stage. As more of western society’s communication occurs primarily in the digital realm, journalists, editors, producers and media networks try to adapt to the indefinitely expandable and reproducible realm of digital and web-centered communications. In his book, The Theory of Communicative Action, Jürgen Habermas explains the capitalist drive that

InfoTrends Inc., 2004). As the 21st century progresses, more Americans own digital cameras each year.
commodified communication and media and therein colonized our private lives, dissolving the separation between the private self and the public self. He explains that the capitalist market has colonized the once personal human relations, “the more leisure, culture, recreation, and tourism recognizably come into the consumption, the more the structures of the bourgeois family manifestly become adapted to the imperatives of the employment system.” Habermas seemingly predicted that the business structures of the 21st century, where corporations and other large bodies of control have appropriated technological breakthroughs, would maintain tighter authority over their subjects. Online communications are now privy to employers and other people of influence, which to Habermas would show how our very sense of private interiority has been “colonized” by media and corporations. The result of this is that we are no longer rational actors Habermas wished for humans to be.

Whereas in the Vietnam War broadcasts only took place Monday through Friday at 6:30 PM, news websites today update every few minutes. During Vietnam, and even in the Gulf War, news coming from the war zone depended upon satellite technology. This technology works more slowly than web-based processing technologies. In satellite broadcasting, a cameraman or reporter captures the news on the ground, then feeds the recording tape in a makeshift studio-truck. It is then transmitted via satellite to the news bureau in the United States and edited for broadcast. This processing pattern is slow by today’s digital technology standards. Today, many mainstream TV media sources still operate using this satellite technology, resulting in more lag time between the event and its mediation to the

public. The advantages of publishing straight to the web include removing the editor, the executive, the producer, and the network chief, while also taking far less time to put the event in circulation for public consumption. Moreover, such Internet circulation reaches farther and wider than any standard televisual broadcast.

In other words, any individual reporter covering a news event today can send a story into the digital sphere minutes after the event takes place. The lacuna between the event and the event’s mediation to the public has decreased according to how quickly the media has adapted to the digital realm. 9/11 changed the way citizens sought news updates. 13 The public thrived on constant updates and new perspectives offered by bloggers and Internet news outlets. 14 During the initial period of the Iraq War when “the big three broadcast networks [were] delivering only their usual headlines,” 15 Americans used the Internet to gain a more comprehensive picture of the burgeoning war. The Pew Internet and American Life Project concluded: “During the first five days of fighting, the online news audience rose from roughly 29 million to 38 million Americans.” 16 The technology of the 21st century has changed in visible and quantifiable terms. To illustrate this visible evolution, consider how we witnessed the change from dial-up modems to broadband Internet over a mere few years to the point that dial-up now seems like the fossil of a bygone age. Though in the 1990s we reveled in and marveled at the abilities of the Internet, once the web

13 Aaron Barlow, The Rise of the Blogosphere (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2007) 160. “There seemed to be only one source of information, really, though it wore a number of faces.” When many traditional news outlets seemingly trumped the same news as the White House, individuals began to search online for outright biases in their own political leanings.
14 Blogs (first called web-logs by the press) evolved from online diaries and personal websites of the 1990s, into Blogs, which dramatically increased in cultural parlance following 9/11.
16 Seib, 87.
became a part of daily life, Internet users demanded faster connections. We first obsessed over Google and then quickly moved onto YouTube. The essence of digital communication means that users have come to expect rapid technological change.\footnote{Recent technology analysts have argued that the vehicle driving change on the Internet is the demanding online porn industry. “So much of the technology that we’re using now for more risqué purposes had its origins in porn,” said [technology industry analyst Rob] Enderle, who pointed to online ‘streaming video’ as one major example of a technology that was driven by porn in its early days.” See: Mike Musgrove, “Technology’s Steamier Side: Fates of Pornography and Internet Businesses are Often Intertwined.”\url{Washingtonpost.com}, 21 Jan. 06. 4 Apr. 2008 <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10952475>. The irony in this showing is that the ‘pornographic’ images at Abu Ghraib were in part made available so quickly thanks in part to porn itself.}

Have 21st century American citizens considered the consequences of an existence defined in large part by digitality? The scandal at Abu Ghraib clearly suggests that society has not had the time to process the implications of this change. Once military personnel present at Abu Ghraib uploaded and emailed the images depicting abuse, exploitation, and rape, these perversities of power entered the public sphere. The digital pictures taken at Abu Ghraib were presumably intended for a select group. Yet with the roguish possibilities of the Internet, once the pictures made it into the digital ether anybody could take hold of the evidence and make claims about what the images meant. Because the men and women responsible for the acts of abuse at Abu Ghraib did not foresee public access to images of these acts, they could not predict the consequences of committing them. For this reason, they acted carte blanche.

Abu Ghraib, previously a political prison where the dissidents under Saddam Hussein’s regime were locked away, continued to survive as a site for clandestine abuse. Rey Chow explains the tradition of (strangely) assumed ethical righteousness that accounts for U.S. world actions and violence exerted on Other peoples. This perceived moral authority, Chow claims, supported the United States’ right to drop
atomic bombs in 1945. Chow writes, “In this- its absolute conviction of its own moral superiority and legitimacy- lies perhaps the most deeply ingrained connection between the foundation of the United States as an exceptional nation and the dropping of the atomic bombs.” Similarly, our moral authority made it acceptable for the U.S. to at once denounce Saddam Hussein’s history of torture while at the same time allowing members of the U.S. military to systematically abuse prisoners in one of Saddam’s former prisons. Only in 2003 was it under the auspices of Democratic ideals. The acts took place in seclusion: participation was limited to few actors and a small group of subjects. The military personnel involved wrongly assumed their actions at Abu Ghraib would be kept as the group’s private memory.

**Digitally Captured Torture**

My reading of the images examines the way in which these photos were captured, how this process reified systems of imperial control, and the inherent sexual humiliation in these images. In order to discuss the Abu Ghraib photographs, one must acknowledge their most obvious and damning aspect about them: the soldiers are exposed as torturers. Once establishing the soldiers in that regard, I can then analyze the content of the digital photographs and further examine the implications of the technological changes I have described.

When the Americans conquered Baghdad, the military appropriated the structures of Saddam Hussein’s reign under the hyperbolic guise of “spreading freedom.” One of the first instances where the American public should have questioned this guise came when we began to use Saddam’s ex-torture prisons as the

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19 The torture incidents at Abu Ghraib took place in the fall of 2003.
captivity sites for American prisoners of war. By turning one of Saddam’s prisons into a site of American rule, we proclaimed America’s righteous interests in creating a stable and democratic Iraq. Yet the Abu Ghraib scandal showed that the American way of life propagated by U.S. military in the Middle East did not start by teaching Iraqis about democratic institutions. Rather, American soldiers glorified Developed World technology and consumerism. The outbreak of the Abu Ghraib scandal gave the American public hard evidence that proved the occurrence of ignominious acts in Iraq. The scandal provided the public with sufficient reason to question why we waged war with Iraq. The original premise that the U.S. invaded Baghdad to depose a dictator and spread the freedom of ideas was suddenly questioned with the flood of digital evidence picturing debauched acts. The soldiers now looked more like ignorant predators who escaped to a foreign country to gain sexual license, capturing the events with their tourist-friendly device: the digital camera.

The actions of the soldiers were firstly an affront to the Military Code: soldiers cannot carry out acts of torture. Yet the soldiers at Abu Ghraib took the perversion of power to another level when the men and women involved decided to photograph their abuses. The digitized proof of the acts at Abu Ghraib endowed the scandal with a sensationalist and snuff-like pornographic tint, while also elucidating the human ignorance present in parts of our military. In many ways, the photographs read just like photographs captured by a tourist on vacation (albeit an exploitive one complete with photographs of scantily clad “natives”).
Many of the Abu Ghraib images show young American soldiers smiling as if standing in front of a foreign monument, seemingly distanced from their horrific acts. The menacing smiles on the American soldiers show that the Americans soldiers methodically negated the human rights of the individual Iraqis, and instead see the prisoners as ‘booty’ gathered from the spoils of war. The soldiers neglected to use foresight when they chose to record their abuses making the images appear like postcards sent from abroad. As Sontag writes, “[as a] way of certifying experience, taking photographs is also a way of refusing it […] by converting experience into an image, a souvenir.” 20 Conservative talk show host Rush Limbaugh downplayed the severity of the soldiers’ actions when on his August 4, 2004 radio show, he claimed that the torture was actually, “sort of like hazing, a fraternity prank. Sort of like that

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kind of fun. The images of Abu Ghraib show gleeful faces that seem to enjoy torturing prisoners and subjecting Iraqi bodies into positions of humiliation and sexual exploitation. To characterize such acts as “a fraternity prank” sheds light on our 21st-century obsession with media’s talking heads. It also illuminates the radio medium in particular as a venue that allows for extreme positions to be aired. The quick-edit version on hot-topics in our political culture rarely adds depth to the subject so depicted. Rather, news pundits deliver incendiary comments catering to a specific side of the political spectrum. Such occurred when Limbaugh called the Abu Ghraib scandal a “fraternity prank.”

The culture of new media is roughly the same age as the War on Terror, and the parallels between them are suggestive. The War on Terror relies on mediatization and in turn, media relies on war to gain popularity and wide circulation. Moreover, such major shocks as the Abu Ghraib photos came by way of new media, which suggests a relation of mutual dependence between these cultural-historical phenomena. Vast swaths of the public received their news about 9/11, and the two wars that followed, through the digital realm. Consider the traditional TV newscast, which today involves the news anchor informing the viewer to log onto the network’s website for up-to-the-minute news. TV news is mediated to the public from an isolated perspective, one that is out of sync with the plethora of online news sources that let a person search for a specific story. Andrew Hoskins writes that in television, “under the conditions of ‘event time’ […] TV firstly ensures that something happens, and secondly organizes itself around the happening, there occurs a certain
displacement of anything outside of the event itself.”

For TV viewers, especially those who use the Internet for daily communication, the displacement of TV broadcasting is perceived through the culture as an artifact of the media (which I have suggested thus acts as L’Ancien Régime). While it is true that the War on Terror can be rhetorically packaged and sold to much of the media-consuming public using the same Manichean objectives that were fitting for the Cold War, in the 21st century the same is not true of the new media’s multiple relays of images, perspectives, and stories about war. Our society is frequently reminded through governmental rhetoric that although the terrorists come from societies more economically depressed than our own, they understand how to use new technologies to the best of their advantage. Because our society now records the memories of many cultures en masse through digital cameras and email messages, the disconnect that occurs between an event and its broadcast can no longer render a comprehensive, unitary, or one-sided news story. As, “living memory appears increasingly to be usurped and commodified in and through the ubiquitous electronic media archive,” societies that live with the benefits and tools of a digital lifestyle increasingly depend on Internet capabilities to understand their world.

The shock factor of the images made the Abu Ghraib scandal perfect for 21st Century News. In an industry driven by quick edits, seductive graphics, and high ratings or website hits, the images of Abu Ghraib were some Americans’ introduction to what I would call terror-pornography: images that beg the audience to look closer even as moral instincts repulse the viewer. One wants to believe that the pictures are

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23 Hoskins, 29.
not real, and that the images are creations of digital photography software. However, these images came from the cameras of Corporals and Specialists, and the images represent the perversion of power in the military and the fractured state of democracy in America. The Bush Administration behind this democracy had preached since September 11, 2001 that the founding ideals of American freedom and liberty could thwart off the offenses of the misanthropic and supposedly freedom-hating terrorists. Yet when the images of Abu Ghraib dispersed into various media outlets and thereby entered popular culture, for the first time a resounding uncertainty shook the premise of the War on Terror. Was there a reason we were fighting the War in Iraq? Congressmen, News pundits, and average citizens began to ask the question together.

A striking feature of the Abu Ghraib photographs comes across in the mundanely pleasant faces on the soldiers. In none of the pictures do the soldiers photographed show signs of dismay or disgust with their actions. The photos indicate two perversities. First off, that the soldiers and chain of command at Abu Ghraib derived pleasure from voyeuristically prying on Other’s humiliation; and secondly, the total nonchalance with which the soldiers captured incriminating events, using a camera to record their offenses. With over two-hundred photographs released from the scandal, the effect created a sense that what the soldiers were carrying out was not in fact an aberration of military policy, but perhaps something endemic to the culture of American power. The proliferation of the images shocked the American public. The utter lack of foresight—that the soldiers photographed so many distinct acts of torture—was dumbfounding. The idea that the cause of the problem resided

not only with the men and women taking the photos and those who emailed the pictures, but also higher up in the Pentagon, disturbed the American public. They wondered at the source of such bravado, prompting demands that someone high up the chain of command take responsibility. People are able to share digital photography so quickly that the sheer speed of the event's dispersal can interfere with one's moral judgment. Perhaps, human reasoning has been assaulted by the sped-up time lapse from the moment one clicks the trigger on the camera to the point when the image appears on the playback screen. The instantaneous nature of digital photography may account for why a person shares legally or morally incriminating pictures. The technology itself is so easy as to be banal, thus removing any sense of reality and reason from the process of pointing and clicking.

The above image shows an Iraqi prisoner naked, hooded in female underwear and handcuffed to a wall. In such a position, the man is deprived of movement, sight, and speech. The image also captures the man between the jail bars. By the man being imprisoned, his agency and individual modes of being operate in a severely curtailed state. Therefore, taking a picture of a prisoner behind bars is redundant, and operates solely as a sadistic outlet for the photographer. In the picture, the man appears handcuffed (a well-known archetype of a prisoner), which reinforces his subjected body and the limited humanity afforded to a prisoner. The man’s penis is situated almost directly in the center of the frame, making it so that the photographer controls the prisoner’s phallus. As a result, the man has been hypothetically castrated. This appropriation of the physical sign of male power by the photographer endows Americans with their very sense of freedom. Our ability to capture Muslim penises for pleasure and share such images with others indicates that we appropriate power at the expense of others.

Moreover, the image boasts of cultural and religious ignorance. Religious scriptures as well as social practices of covering the body tend to define normative practices of sexuality for believers. The Abu Ghraib images enforce a set of beliefs that the Iraqi prisoners exist outside of the Natural Rights of Man. The American men and women forced Iraqi men into sexualized and subservient positions, making the prisoner’s human bodies take on forms as if they were Play-Doh. The Americans in charge at Abu Ghraib abused their power and forced the prisoners into obedient poses. In this image, the man lowers his head in undeniable discomfort and shame, as “Homosexual acts are against Islamic law and it is humiliating for men to be naked in
front of other men.” The photographer establishes his autonomy in juxtaposition to the subjectivity of the prisoner by standing on the opposite side of the cell bars. By covering the man’s head with underwear and photographing the prisoner naked, the American soldiers conferred an extremely inferior status to the imprisoned man. With the arrival of such images throughout a variety of mainstream media outlets in the spring and summer of 2004, journalists began to pose a question to American citizens: did the images of Abu Ghraib indicate a mismanaged or villainous wing to the American military? Furthermore, are these techniques explicitly or implicitly condoned in the Bush administration’s War on Terror?

One of the most widely circulated images of the Abu Ghraib scandal came to be known as the “Dogpile.” In the following digital picture, six naked men have been posed to form a human pyramid:

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Behind the de-individuated cluster of bodies stand Corporal Charles Graner Jr. and Private Lynndie England with sadistic smiles and “thumbs-up” signs. That the bodies have been arranged into such a pyramid shape indicates the orchestrating roles of the American soldiers. The Abu Ghraib photos show prisoners from a single cellblock who attempted to start a riot. Such punishment visited on the prisoners reveals profound psychological warfare, while several pictures show physical torture. The indistinguishable mess of Iraqi bodies as opposed to the erect Americans standing behind them displays a major discrepancy between the individual and the mass body. The American soldiers and the photographer of the picture act as the arch-individual, as demeaning the prisoners’ bodies by de-individuating them. When bodies are so arranged, they are no longer composed of people but decompose into a pile. Thus the soldiers reduce the life of the prisoners even further than one might expect in a prison by reducing life to its bare components. As prison guards, the soldiers remain sovereign actors, endowed with free will and the ability to grant significance to the prisoner’s lives when the free agents feel so inclined. Indeed, the status of the lives, deaths, wellness or pains of the piled bodies depends upon those controlling them. The arrangement of the Iraqi bodies display men who look like corpses who have been positioned by the American soldiers, just as an undertaker arranges a body in its

26 W. Lance Bennett, Regins G. Lawrence, Steven Livingston, When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007) 91. In the outbreak of the Abu Ghraib scandal, few news organizations went as far as to label the photos as instances of torture. Usually in mainstream television news, Abu Ghraib was called an “abuse scandal,” but even a prominently intellectual paper, like The Washington Post, stayed clear of calling the acts at Abu Ghraib torture, “Torture has a stronger connection in both common usage and legal terminology to intentional behavior […] than do the terms mistreatment and abuse.” However, pictures that showed electrocution, and unmuzzled attack dogs, display acts of wanton cruelty, and do in fact violate the Geneva Conventions definition of torture.
coffin. In this way, the bodies are depicted as a heap of death, suggesting mass killing.

Other images released by the Abu Ghraib scandal showed signs of more explicit sexual abuse than the pyramid image that captured the men in lewd positions. In the following image, “Forced Masturbation,” once again features Private Lynndie England giving her infamous sign of approval, the “thumbs-up”:

Again in this picture, six Iraqi men are pictured, while the focal point of the image draws the viewer’s attention to the semi-erect penis in the bottom right corner of the frame. In the Army’s criminal investigation of the abuses at Abu Ghraib, England confessed that, “she saw [Staff Sergeant Ivan] Frederick move a detainee's arm in a
masturbating motion.” A pornographic element is once again introduced into the Abu Ghraib narrative when the soldiers at Abu Ghraib directed the prisoners to masturbate, and then took pictures of the acts.

By examining the sexual positions of the prisoners, we can understand the psychological inferiority the Americans wished to confer upon the Iraqis. The Americans sexually exploited the prisoners by arranging their bodies into demeaning positions. Either through the dog pile position or by forced masturbation, the Americans placed the prisoners into poses of sexual trauma. The forced masturbation pose in the images actually implies a sexual impossibility. Masturbation connotes an individual’s choice to arouse their sex organs, and touch their body in a sexually fulfilling way. To force a person to masturbate actually nullifies the said act. Forcing sexual acts onto an individual falls under the criminal category of rape. In “Forced Masturbation”, we can see how the Americans directed the prisoners to hold onto their penises and move them in masturbating motions. Once the penises appeared semi-erect they took pictures, so to humiliate the prisoners by insisting, “You must really like this humiliation,” since they brought on their physiological arousal. The cavalier pose that Private England assumed, as she dangles a cigarette out of her mouth and points to the semi-erect penis, exposes soldiers’ belief that the Iraqis (sub-humans) liked their own humiliation. While in the masturbation picture the prisoner participates in his humiliation, the dog pile series shows the choreographing role of the Americans. In such images, the Iraqi men appear in sexually subservient and indeed anally receptive positions. The viewer cannot see faces or hands of the Iraqis,

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but possesses a view of their prone genitals and some of the men’s bodily orifices. The men then appear just like women in mainstream pornography, where bodies come across as reduced to nothing more than orifices whose only significance is to display the insides of the body through its openings. It should be noted that some of the officers charged with abuse of power at Abu Ghraib were found guilty of sodomizing the prisoners with foreign objects.

In the forced masturbation image, the prisoners wear plastic bags over their heads, further removing the subjects from their role as human beings. They appear as cattle awaiting slaughter. Private England points to the erect penis as a cigarette dangles out of her mouth, enjoying her cowboy-like strut, as she freely tilts back her hips and shows a relaxed smile. Of the six Iraqis shown in this picture, only three bodies are pictured in their entirety. The effect of showing three fully naked men, and three male bodies cut off from a full shot, brings about an impression of sexual slaves. The American soldier does not need a full view of the bodies as the meaning is granted through the subjected penises, as the men debasingly lined up against the wall.

One of the more striking elements in the three above images comes from the acephalous man (or men) pictured in each. To remove a man’s head brings his body to the level of livestock. A man without a head cannot possess cognitive abilities. As such, he is brought into close proximity with animal existence. In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben discusses the perilous division that makes humans different than animals. Agamben sees that because Man can think and uses language to order his world, humans reign over animals. By thus separating himself from the
animal, he creates a category into which he can dump some people as less than human. The Abu Ghraib images imply a similar hierarchical impulse at work in our military. An assumption that prisoners of war taken captive in Iraq are decidedly terrorists, and thereby lose human rights, makes the Iraqi prisoner not much higher than an animal. By removing and literally denuding their humanity, the soldiers introduce a species-level divide between themselves and their prisoners. Agamben insists that, “the relation between man and animal marks the boundary of an essential domain,” so to examine the process by which war denigrates humans into cattle exposes an event in which the supposed righteous qualities of a free nation are called into question. The images of Abu Ghraib stand as a point in the post-9/11 trajectory where American imperialism resurfaced on millions of TV screens and computer monitors. Whether the images of the torture scandal abated American support for the War in Iraq is subjective. How American media portrayed Abu Ghraib in conjunction to other disturbing events of the Iraq War is something I now turn to.

II. Removing the Anchor: Saddam’s Execution

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The Saddam Hussein execution on December 30, 2006, indisputably stands as a break in the way 21st century citizens obtain their news. In war reporting, news companies make decisions on how to package some very gruesome stories. The companies aim to provide the public with as “truthful” a report as possible, but the Hussein execution showed that perhaps “truth” was no longer the forte of TV news. Following Saddam Hussein’s hanging, the Internet proved to be the adept medium for displaying the shocking images of his death, as certain images were still deemed inappropriate for network broadcasts. Due to the presence of new media, Internet consumers now search online for subjective, or nuanced analysis of their world events. Somehow people understand when they live through a historical moment. JFK’s assassination, the Berlin Wall falling down, 9/11: these events almost immediately change the international political climate. The same was true of Saddam’s execution. Following the depressed reputation of America after Abu Ghraib, the capturing and execution of Saddam seemed to prove that the Iraq mission was not entirely lost. In this complex moment, Internet purveyors could use an
individual lens to comprehend his death. Suddenly, the hyperbolic analysis of the TV news anchor seemed irrelevant to the population who searched online for their information. After Saddam’s hanging, people could find the video on the Internet within days. Images of the hanging appeared even sooner than that. TV continually “dumbs-down” its analysis, as “television news involving lengthy, detailed and retrospective analysis has little chance of attracting mass audiences [since] the impatience of event time coverage does not allow pause for focus, because the next moment is always more important.”

As opposed to the quick-edits and recycled images of Saddam shown on TV, the raw footage of his hanging entered the digital sphere without any breakdown or sanitization. Perhaps in cataclysmic moments, citizens would rather remove the middleman news reporter and find the story through their own Internet search.

The seemingly innocuous Internet search returns a tidal wave of information. How do technophiles, with varying levels of Internet competence, sort through the immense proliferation of videos, images and news sources? “The Repetitious Image”, shown above, displays a screen shot taken from a Google Image search under the query “saddam hanging.” The small images, presented side-by-side, picture different moments of the execution of Saddam. These images speak to the innumerable outlets the public possessed to digitally witness the Saddam Hussein execution. The execution took place in the early hours of December 30, 2006, and by daybreak, images taken from cell phones (later found out to have belonged to jail

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29 Hoskins, 60.
guards) ubiquitously spread online and trickled down into TV news networks. The execution itself defined a breakthrough moment in New Media versus L’Ancien Régime of television reporting: the Internet offered first-hand eyewitness to the deposed dictator, while the traditional media networks struggled in how to report this unprecedented event. The ABC-News Baghdad correspondent, Terry McCarthy, explained why his network decided not to air images of Saddam’s body, “we think they are a little to graphic to show on television.” TV networks remained loyal to the guidelines of TV-sanitized reporting, while the Internet displayed the hanging in an unedited format.

Within the 24 hours following Saddam’s execution, news articles appeared which called the hanging a “bungled” and a mismanaged affair. Criticisms mounted against the U.S. government along with Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Maliki, protesting the sudden rush undertaken to execute Saddam. Saddam waited only 55 days between his sentence and his punishment, compared to the decades U.S. prisoners often wait on Death Row before their executions, as “In our country, the pattern is to be condemned in youth and executed in middle age.” A strain of comments appeared insisting Saddam received specialized (or better than typical) treatment as a condemned-to-death inmate, speculating that the U.S. coalition and Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Maliki afforded Saddam too benevolent of a death sentence. These claims quickly lost their spark when many journalists, as well as the public, began to


independently view the execution video on the web. The most infamous video pictured the hanging in its entirety and came from an official’s cell phone camera. The grainy video shared the qualities of Al Qaeda training tapes, insurgent kidnappings, or, footage from the Fox television series, 24. In the video, Saddam enters the execution chamber amid shouts in Arabic, and cameras flash from below the gallows. His executioners place the noose around his neck. During his last prayer, as the witnesses shout “Moqtada!” (lauding the extremist Shi’ite cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr), Hussein insults the men present and asks them, “Is this how you show your bravery as men? Straight to hell! Is this the bravery of Arabs?” In the midst of reciting his final prayer, a trap door opens and Saddam plunges to death. It takes the cameraman a few seconds to find the hanging body, but when he does, the video captures Saddam with a broken neck, hanging at the end of a noose. Cheers erupt from the chamber as Saddam falls. Nonetheless, the celebratory screams of “Moqtada!” left many Western people wondering if a democratic Iraq will ever be possible.

As American news networks received word on December 29th that the hanging would occur later that night, news networks began to question what images of Saddam’s hanging were fit for TV, and leaving the rest subject to Internet voyeurism. While the Iraqi parliament commissioned a cameraman to capture Saddam on the gallows, the famous video came from the official who used his cell phone. Pundits and journalists discussed the merits of citizen-journalism. The ability to capture news is now a radically democratized—if economically uneven—space,

where anyone with a connection to the Internet can take part. The Saddam hanging even rendered the traditional digital camera obsolete, as the only tool needed in our age to cover the most epic events is a mobile phone. In a medium like TV news, “a medium that feeds on immediacy,”34 no network heads questioned showing the video. Rather, “it was just a question of not having to wait too long to see it.”35 Thus TV is further induced to speed up its digital processing to compete with Internet reports; yet, when images reach the public at such a rapid rate, journalists forget to censor what might be emotionally or physically disturbing for their viewers.

Using the Internet is usually regarded as a gift of Developed Nation economic success, and only at certain times are we reminded of the responsibilities that come along with an online persona. With the many ways the Internet ‘simplifies’ a 21st century lifestyle, one can forget the menacing features present in online territory. While critical TV viewers can pick out the biases in a news broadcast, many forget that editing a news story need not always be read as “censorship.” Some network executives, in line with the Federal Communications Commission, understand that not everything that is photographed or videotaped is suitable for viewers. An Internet search, like the one pictured in the “Repetitious Image,” underlines this understanding. In the first decade of the 21st century, America has transitioned into a country that uses the Internet for daily communications, for reading the news, watching or downloading entertainment, and for daily searches for topical

34 Stanley, A14.
35 Stanley, A14.
As Internet capabilities have become entrenched in one’s daily routines, American citizens can forget about the malignant underbelly of technology.

Marked by violence and released through a rogue source, the Saddam execution video looks like the sort of material released by the Iraqi insurgents or Al Qaeda. Ironically, the material in the Saddam hanging was explicitly condoned by the United States, while insurgent videos obtain tags like “propaganda.” The unedited version of Saddam’s hanging looks like the insurgent videos that captured the beheading of American businessman Nicholas Berg in 2004, as both events are endowed with a great sense of primitivism. The message conveyed is that these people appear outside of our civilization; as the media classifies them as barbarians. Television networks treated the Berg beheading and the Saddam hanging similarly:

Mary Madden, “Internet Penetration and Impact,” Pew Internet & American Life Project, Apr. 26 2006 Ap. 5 2008 <http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/182/report_display.asp> “Internet users have become more likely to note big improvements in their ability to shop and the way they pursue their hobbies and interests[…]A majority of internet users also consistently report that the internet helps them to do their job and improves the way the get information about health care [as] 73% of respondents (about 147 million adults) are internet users.”
they each broadcast the fear-infused video only until the truly terrifying moment. In Hussein’s video, this meant stopping before the trapdoor opened. For Berg, the footage ended before the last five minutes of footage that showed Musab Al-Zarqawi decapitating Berg. Yet whether the mainstream media aired the disturbing footage or not, many Americans thought they could endure the unedited videos and watched the killings online. So long 24, for in the Age of Terror, snuff-like reality easily triumphs fiction and art.

The images that circulated online following Saddam Hussein’s execution again bore the appearance to what I described in my Abu Ghraib discussion as terror-pornography. The plethora of still images of Saddam hanging, as pictured in “Saddam on a Noose,” arouse curious instincts in a viewer to want to see images that might reveal more. One can take an instinct like this and begin a YouTube search for the hanging video. On searching “Saddam Hussein hanging,” on YouTube, 949 videos are called up. After watching the video of Saddam’s execution, one’s intrigue could peak and one might wish to search for any sort of terrorist-related video. The problem I see in watching these sorts of alarming Internet videos comes from the shock factor they induce and subsequent harmful side effects. An adult might believe he or she wants to watch a terrorist video, for reasons as disparate as curiosity and civic duty; however, these videos often contain traumatic material. Only after the video finishes might the viewer realize that watching the video was the wrong choice.

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37 Alleged is shown here in parentheses because the man in the execution video claimed to be Zarqawi; but the man also had a mysterious past, and would claim responsibility for nearly an terror related act. See: ABCNews Investigative Unit. “The Insider: Daily Terrorism Report.” Abcnews.com. 7 June 06. 25 Mar. 08. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/Investigation/story?id=79157&page=1>.
The gruesome reality of the videos can turn out to be far more disturbing than enlightening for the viewer.

In its many forms, Internet media continues to increase in usage, yet the repercussions of this new form of entertainment and information remain uncharted. Unlike TV news, which totes the handsome anchorman, in Internet video there is no professional to mediate the subject to the viewer. Internet videos appear in their full-bodied and often-hazardous forms, to shock, appall and disgust. The videos haunt in their cinematic authenticity, as “Terrorists have been quick to understand that the camera has the power to frame a single atrocity and turn it into an image that sends shivers down the spine of an entire planet.”\textsuperscript{38} There is an impulse in the American public to use the Internet to access the unedited version of the war in Iraq or Afghanistan. The videos and images available at the fingertips of the American public do not make the war in Iraq any more lucid. This begs the question: who produces the world’s popular Internet culture: the American entertainment industry or anti-American Terrorists?

After watching the video of the Saddam hanging, does a viewer feel in any way alleviated? Does the video bring clarity to the complex status of the U.S. war in Iraq? A viewer can mistakenly feel that watching videos on YouTube works no differently than watching a movie in the privacy of their home. After all, the viewer controls the stop/play functions on Internet video. However, I believe it takes a shocking video such as Saddam’s execution to make the viewer actualize the reality of the video. Perhaps the last decade, in which technology overcame our daily

communications and entertainment, made for a more complacent public. The

generation of individuals who grew up on MTV, became aroused by Internet
pornography, embraced car explosions and recently turned to terrorist training videos,
had attained visual-processing systems seemingly inured to disturbing materials.
Who is to say there is a difference between the “fetish pornography” available to
adults, and the terror-pornography on YouTube (which require an above-18 consent
form) available to a similarly curious audience? In Internet culture, images
simultaneously arouse interest and fear in their viewers. They may not make the war
in Iraq more comprehensive, but they elucidate a certain reality: one the national
leaders instinctually want to hide.

III. A Picture Perfect Opportunity to End the War

Through the late 1990s, America seemed to proudly to wear a shroud of
invincibility. Our ostensible coat of strength protected America from the fears that
haunted the citizens of the many violent regimes in South, Central, and Latin
America. We escaped unharmed from the Cold War, unlike post-Soviet era wars that
struck Eastern Europe at the end of the 20th century. Even when fear and speculation
abounded in American media leading up to the supposed technological apocalypse
of Y2K, all American worries were for naught, as America entered the millennium
more like a lamb than as a lion. This peacetime complacency continued into the first
nine months of the George W. Bush presidency; and then suddenly, the world
definitively changed on September 11, 2001. Though the attacks occurred on U.S.
American soil, the repercussions of 9/11 would be felt worldwide. Following the
terrorist attacks, the Bush administration articulated the new “War on Terror,” which would come to mark the first decade of the 21st century. A particular region of the world received considerable contempt and attention from the White House and the Pentagon. This region, of course, was the Middle East.

When American military forces entered Baghdad on March 20, 2003, television news employed their finest digital craftsmen to make the imminent war seem much more like a TV mini-series. In the days leading up to the coalition invasion, cable news networks dubbed their coverage “The Countdown to Invasion.” TV screens emblazoned with waving American flags pictured correspondents reporting from Middle Eastern locations, each speculating on when the invasion might begin and how much military force would be used. The beginning of the media coverage of the War in Iraq appeared a lot more like reality TV than like a news broadcast on a war: TV correspondents pitched their plotlines for the war and the stakes that the projected winner, the coalition forces, could bring home. On the eve of the war, news networks took their lead from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld when he promised that the Iraqi people would undergo “Shock and Awe” as they beheld the swiftness and “humanity” of the American firepower attacking Baghdad. On the night of March 20, 2003, just like a quirky and authoritative title to a reality-TV episode, news networks reiterated Rumsfeld’s claim to a quick and principled war as they dubbed their war coverage, “Shock and Awe.” America’s TB news coverage in the initial days of the War in Iraq would have longstanding effects. The TV news that broke out along with the war relied on all Pentagon hyperbole. TV news parroted the Pentagon asserting that Operation Iraqi Freedom was “just,”
and a war for “liberation.” The American public quickly became accustomed to sanitized version of war: patrolled equally by U.S. Marines as by the savvy news anchor reporting from the battlefield.39

The place and role of imagery in constructing public understanding of the Iraq War deceived the American audience from the beginning. Any American who sat down to watch TV news in the last week of March in 2003 became acquainted with the “embedded” reporter: a journalistic position created by the Pentagon. More than 600 reporters were embedded in U.S. forces at the outbreak of the war.40 Developed by the Department of Defense in order to avoid criticism similar to that directed against the censorship present in the Gulf War, the embedded reporter in 2003 delivered a steady stream of news reports. The “embeds” lived among a division of U.S. soldiers and their reports portrayed, “a real sense of purpose and destination [as they were] somewhat reminiscent of road movies, with the adventure and camaraderie of travel on the open highway.”41 Due to the success of reality television, news executives wanted their war coverage to appeal to the same entertainment sensibilities as primetime programming. The embedded reporter seemed to serve this purpose as the stories he delivered displayed, “a continuous feed of live material from the zone of conflict [which] produced vivid and dramatic

39 French theorist Guy Debord explains how in modern societies people mediate their environment by incorporating lavish images even into the mundane, as social life is only understood through the aesthetically spectacular, “The spectacle cannot be understood either as a deliberate distortion of the visual world or as a product of the technology of mass dissemination of images. It is far better viewed as a weltanschauung [ideology] that has been actualized, translated into the material realm- a world view transformed into an objective force.” Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle (New York: Zone Books, 1967) 13.
40 Hoskins, 57.
41 Hoskins, 60.
images."⁴² The American television audience could tuned in to watch embedded reporters on any of the television networks, yet the different broadcasts all seemed to tell the same stories.⁴³ In the wake of 9/11, the American audience favored patriotism over opinionated journalists.⁴⁴ After the first night of television coverage of the Iraq War, the graphic banner of “Shock and Awe” soon reappeared as the war’s mantra, at least through the lens of American media. One of the iconic moments in the first month of the war came when American troops toppled a statue of Saddam located in a city square. Newspapers and television news broadcasts around the world displayed the image, along with their subjective rendering of what the toppled statue meant.⁴⁵ American newspapers commended the U.S. soldiers for dismantling a Saddam statue in the heart of Baghdad, while other news sources critiqued the event in various gradations. Such sources explained that the statue fell in a square across from the Palestine Meridian Hotel, where many journalists found their lodging in Baghdad, explaining that the event was inspired by the media presence. This symbolic toppling of Saddam came to represent different ideologies to different media outlets. Nearly all American newspapers proclaimed the image a victory, and framed the event as a watershed point in Iraqi history. Shahira Fahmy writes, “These favorable images

⁴² Hoskins, 60.
⁴³ One example of an embed-experiment gone awry was with ABC News World News Tonight anchorman, Bob Woodruff. While embedded with an infantry division, Woodruff was nearly killed by an improvised explosive device. Woodruff’s experience proved to media networks how the “embed program” crafted by Department of Defense had serious and dangerous flaws.
⁴⁴ Philip Seib, Beyond the Front Lines: How the News Media Cover a World Shaped by War (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) Survey conducted by ABC News in January 2003, “When asked whether the news media should support or question the government’s war effort, 56 percent said support, 36 percent said question.” 30
gave the impression that masses of Iraqis participated in the event.”46 Nations with less American sympathies for the cause of the Iraq War framed the event as an imperialistic undertaking: as their proof they showed an image of an American soldier placing an American flag on the grounds of the statue directly following its fall.47 The media sources based in countries with disapproving sentiments toward the U.S. denied that many Iraqi men attended the toppling, and pointed out that the reason the American media made so many dramatic claims about the event’s significance was due to the location of the statue: across the street from American journalists’ lodging. Though this event took place in the first month of military operations in Iraq, it foreshadowed how the news would be mediated to the public in the following years of the war. Like most remembered events of the War in Iraq, the toppling of the Saddam statue depended on the resonance that the images produced. A widely photographed event makes it so that the event gains widespread public appeal, while the framing of the event determines how the public will perceive the news.

Whereas the American public learned about Abu Ghraib and Saddam Hussein’s execution through digital images, other events in the war reached the public through more traditional forms of news broadcasting. The greatest pure spectacle of the Iraq War occurred not in the Persian Gulf, but off the coast of California. It was an orchestration of grandeur that took place on May 1, 2003, when President Bush landed on U.S. aircraft carrier U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln in full naval regalia. The landing on the aircraft carrier took the form of a three-part act.

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46 Fahmy, 163.
47 Fahmy, 146.
The first act debuted the President landing a naval plane on the carrier; the second act pictured the president engrossed in a three-hour tour of the ship; the finale was a primetime TV address by the President.\textsuperscript{48} The effect of all the components of President Bush’s time on U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln showcased manipulations of cinematic proportion, and sold the American public a public-relations extravaganza as consumable as if it were actual news.\textsuperscript{49} The Bush Administration relieved the TV networks of the duty of picking a placard for their broadcasts, for behind President Bush waved a banner in red, white and blue. The banner pronounced “Mission Accomplished,” as the President told the nation that major combat operations in Iraq were complete.

\textsuperscript{48} Frank Rich, The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth in Bush’s America (New York: Penguin Press, 2006) “The speech was scheduled for primetime in the East, on the most watched night of television of the week, Thursday […] and in a heavily promoted Nielsen ratings “sweeps” month besides. A large and captive audience was guaranteed.” 89
\textsuperscript{49} “The spectacle manifests itself as an enormous positivity out of reach and beyond dispute. All it says is ‘everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.’” Debord, 15.
President Bush’s address from the naval carrier reached the American public in a more traditional manner than did the images of Abu Ghraib and/or Saddam Hussein’s execution. This is because television mediated the event. The event resounded loudly of cinematic qualities because it operated as a highly orchestrated photo opportunity. The event did not transpire naturally. Rather, it was created for the sake of being captured on film. President Bush’s White House image-makers manufactured the event, yet newscasts aired the event as if it merited a “Breaking News” headline. Bush’s address fit seamlessly into the primetime scheduling of a television network. The event entailed beautiful lighting, a scenic background and a masculine hero; the event took the shape of a reality TV show by suggesting that nothing was staged. Responding to the beating war drums, News broadcasts, began to shape their programs more like reality-TV programming as, “Networks succumbed to the entertainment format of reality television as news values were collapsed into the need for events of the moment.”\(^5^0\) In the initial months of the war, journalists and the Bush administration alike could only confirm the progress of the war via images. The landing on U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln encapsulated the perfectibility of a primetime address, and in a television broadcast abundant with images of strong wartime president and a supportive army, Bush’s address appeared stalwart in the promise that the U.S. had accomplished its mission in Iraq.

The Bush presidency used television networks in an effort to woo the American public into believing that the war had been won, relying on the instant gratification that television provides. The point in this discussion is not to deride the

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\(^{50}\) Hoskins, 59.
“Mission Accomplished” landing; I simply wish to question its veracity. The public cannot rely on the images generated from the “Mission Accomplished” landing to gain a full comprehension of the war in Iraq or the status of the American military in any way. The landing and TV address transpired perfectly. They were too perfect to be considered news. Instead, the address bore a closer resemblance to a theatre production. The made-for-TV event clearly promoted the Bush presidency’s motivation to reach civilian and military consensus on the outcome of the war. One can see how important the “Mission Accomplished” spectacular is to the U.S. narrative about the Iraq War, if one considers the iconic image and meaning that the “Mission Accomplished,” banner still retains. Though President Bush’s approval rating has descended rapidly throughout the last two years of his presidency, the

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51 Theatre of war discussion to follow in Chapter 3.
image of him as a naval cowboy enforced his masculine faculties. In a time period when news broadcasts report “Breaking News” on a daily basis, the ability of an event to maintain a place in the American consciousness stands outside the regular deluge of images used in building the narrative of our war in Iraq. The “Mission Accomplished” landing forms a significant point in the Iraq narrative. An image like “Mission Accomplished” has gained cultural recognition in the five years since the war began. The creation of the image has been “repeated and dissected,”52 as to disassociate it from its “context and meaning, other than it being recognizable as an iconic image.”53 To counter negative stories that emerge from war, the White House has intermittently manufactured press events so President Bush can appear a supreme and unburdened ruler. However, since Americans can now go online and search news outlets with varying levels of sympathy toward the U.S., this valiant picture of the President faces opposition from unlimited anonymous sources. Government spin appears all the more obvious when citizens learn about the news via the perspective of their favorite political blog.

The way that “Mission Accomplished,” Saddam’s Hanging and Abu Ghraib have stayed central to the American narrative of the war, attests to the way Americans interpret war through the images we find online and, occasionally on the TV. In the wake of violent events in Iraq, the Bush administration retorts by sending the press secretary out in front of journalists to interpolate such bad events and images through the continued optimism of the White House. At Abu Ghraib, American soldiers used the consumer device of the digital camera to capture acts of torture. The YouTube

52 Hoskins, 60.
53 Hoskins, 60.
video of Saddam’s hanging was made public by a cell-phone. Yet the White House has not changed to cover and deliver press events through the online medium. “Mission Accomplished” transpired to the public through traditional TV news. Using this method, the White House attracted a mass market by broadcasting during primetime TV hours. Yet for many Americans, this old system of top-down news dispatches seems like a relic of a past era. The Internet public is getting used to obtaining their news from the ground up, and patching their views together with the disparate voices of bloggers. It may be true that George W. Bush’s administration has not adjusted to the 21st century in terms of the advances made by digital media, but this might not matter. Instead, the administration has created a new system of governance to fit the War on Terror.
Chapter 3

These Are Exceptional Times: A Weak Press Versus Virtual Warfare

I. The State of Exception: The U.S. After 9/11

In order to consider why the war in Iraq has been rendered as it has in the images discussed in chapter two, we should place U.S. political policy in the framework of post-9/11 anomie. Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush explained to the nation that to fight the perpetrators, we would need to reshape the way we think about fighting terrorists. President Bush explained that the terrorists responsible for the 9/11 attacks thought themselves to be immune to morality and law, and that therefore, the political, legal and physical weapons the U.S. needed would come out of a larger and more radically reconceived crime-fighting paradigm than that on which we routinely depended. Giorgio Agamben examines in his 2005 work, State of Exception, how under conditions much like those following 9/11—conditions of emergency—rulers in totalitarian and democratic states alike will invoke such emergency in order to suspend traditional juridical due process. By doing so, they create a state of exception, which, as Agamben explains, makes the suspension of law itself into a necessity to fight the so-called lawless terrorists. I find his explanation particularly useful for exploring how the current epoch is an extraordinary one where a far greater share of legislative and

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1 Giorgio Agamben borrows Émile Durkheim’s term anomie. While Durkheim used the term to describe the moral vacuity, and loss of authentic personal identity inherent to industrialized societies, Agamben uses the term to explain the societal fear that arises in a state of lawlessness.
juridical powers will now be aligned under the Executive, who possesses the omniscient knowledge needed to control and govern the era.

Giorgio Agamben wrote *The State of Exception* largely in response to President Bush’s executive decisions made after September 11th. Agamben observed that President Bush posited a new system of law that in fact is outside of the law by pointing to the suspension of *Habeas Corpus* with respect to detainees at Guantanamo Bay. Doing so allows Agamben to explain a site that literally allows lawlessness to replace law. The abuses carried out at Abu Ghraib also fit into this model. The physical territories of Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib are not part of the United States (they are outside the traditional boundaries), but in a State of Exception these areas are brought under U.S. control. As such, they are within the purview of U.S. law but extra-territorial and thus extra-legal in status and symbol. Since they are outside U.S. territory, America can use these sites as acceptable locales for physical abuse, the indefinite suspension of habeas corpus, and the detaining of suspects without warrants for their arrests. Agamben’s theory of the State of Exception shows how in extraordinary political climates, the state will break away from its previous model of rule to implement a state devoid of traditional constitutional rights.

President Bush established a political “no man’s land” when he enforced something like an absolute rule and suspended the constitution in decreeing a military order on November 13, 2001. The military order mandated that, “I [President Bush] have determined that an extraordinary emergency exists for national defense purposes, that this emergency constitutes an urgent and compelling government

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3 Agamben, 3.
interest, and that issuance of this order is necessary to meet the emergency.” In this decision, the President suspends the juridical process normally granted to criminal detainees and Prisoners of War, by arguing that U.S. had entered a state of siege on 9/11 and would need to suspend the law to create a new norm for rule. A primary symbol as well as an (extra-) legal framework for the State of Exception in the 9/11 Era is the USA Patriot Act, passed on October 26, 2001. The Patriot Act granted the right for U.S. agents to search the telephone, Internet, and financial history of any U.S. citizen who is merely suspected of having ties to a terrorist unit. The Patriot Act denies habeas corpus from terrorist suspects held in detention centers, like the one at Guantanamo Bay, thus making it so that suspected terrorists can be held in detention indefinitely. Habeas Corpus was codified in 17th century England, to limit the King’s power to overturn court rulings. So when we suspend such laws, to borrow Agamben’s words, the state “radically erases any legal status of the individual, thus producing a legally un-nameable and unclassifiable being.”

The Patriot Act, and President Bush’s rhetoric following 9/11, defined the terrorists as shadowy figures who personified evil. Consider the nebulous character of Al Qaeda terrorists, in comparison to the sociopathic dictator Saddam Hussein, a

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5 “Habeas Schmabeas.” This American Life, WBEZ, Chicago. 10 Mar. 2006.

6 Agamben, 3.
world actor who needs only a very short introduction. U.S. citizens were aware of Hussein and the threats his regime posed, due to the Gulf War in the early 1990s.

The Bush Administration played into Hussein’s widely known character, as opposed to the widely unknown terrorist Osama bin Laden, when they searched for evidence that might connect the two men. Many Americans could have picked Saddam out of a mugshot lineup (in comparison to the blurred mass of young Arab looking men who perpetrated 9/11) even before the War on Terror began.
In a state of siege, like the one the U.S. found itself in—and that Bush helped create—after 9/11, the highest-ranking official must clarify to his citizens what he plans to do to protect the liberty of the land and its people. When President Bush answered this call with a military order and implemented the USA Patriot Act, he effectively told the citizens of the U.S. that they had entered a new era of history and a new order of law. This era started with the 9/11 attacks as they catapulted the U.S. into a state of siege; where it then became the executive branch’s mandate to suspend law in order to create a new system of rule. The Bush Administration defended this suspension as a directive undertaken to protect law-abiding citizens. Yet, this appears
to be a Catch 22: if the criteria for the State of Exception is to instate a new set of
laws which will protect law-abiding citizens, this concept of citizenry is put into peril
as the regular set of laws have been suspended for a new, and yet unarticulated one,
or rather, one in which the legal status of the citizen itself is deliberately blurred.
Therefore, what laws are these citizens abiding? What constitutes suspicious
behavior? By suspending laws, the executive removes the normative qualities that
define his state. In this case, the State of Exception refers to the absence of state-like
qualities. When a democratic state indefinitely removes the laws of the land, the state
then appears as a space devoid of laws and regulations. It is as if the state creates
within itself a ‘non-state,’ where non-citizens can be placed in order to be subjected
to lawlessness. One might think this absence of established laws could lead to
anarchy, when the opposite has taken place, as citizens in a State of Exception must
surrender highest governmental executive and his administrators. The Commander in
Chief will articulate the new laws for his countrymen when he deems safe and
acceptable. Until then, he leaves the citizens hanging between laws that have been
put on hold, and unpronounced new ones.

Confusion and vulnerability struck through the hearts of millions of Americans
on September 11th, 2001. Americans wanted to know “Why?” the terrorists targeted
us in such a violent way. When we consider the mass bewilderment that rippled
across the nation in the first weeks following 9/11, one can begin to understand how
smoothly the President was able to direct the U.S. into a new standard for government
rule. Many citizens read the 9/11 attacks as a manifestation of an anomic (lawless)
terror that required an almost equally anomic response from the executive branch in
all avenues of life. The Bush Administration seized on a moment of absolute panic in the American consciousness so as to implement a new system of governance. Political and social life after 9/11 now existed under “The War on Terror.” With this pronouncement the U.S. began the fight for Al Qaeda, the organization responsible for the 9/11 attacks, and any group sympathetic to their goals. In October of 2001, the United States began an aerial bombardment and a ground war in Afghanistan, to rid that nation of the Taliban terrorist group and capture its leader, Osama bin Laden. After 17 months of the War in Afghanistan, the U.S. had not captured bin Laden, and still needed to make discernable gains in the ideological war both at home and in Arab and predominantly Muslim states. Soon enough, the State of Exception engulfed U.S. foreign policy and the Bush Administration loosened the War on Terror to refer to a far broader domain of action than the annihilation of bin Laden.

The War on Terror began to reach out to a grander scope of Middle Eastern populations, groups, organizations, and even states. This change in policy thus showed the State of Exception’s, “gradual emancipation from the wartime situation [into] a fictitious, or political one,”7 where the U.S. State Department quickly pointed to Iraq as the next target that needed “U.S. Liberation.” The war drums beat loudly in the several months leading up to March 2003, as Donald Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, and Condoleezza Rice implicitly and explicitly linked the safety of the American homeland to the disposal of Saddam Hussein. The way to convince the U.S. population that the military was ready to downgrade the war in Afghanistan to second place, and declare Saddam’s Baathist regime as the kingpin of Islamic Terrorism, could not happen through State Department and White House rhetoric alone. Images

7 Agamben, 7.
soon permeated the American media in order to explain to citizens—and convince them—that the Hussein regime posed a probable threat to their existence.

II. The Press that Cowered Under The State of Exception

The Bush Administration began in the summer of 2002 to make public speeches strongly admonishing the Hussein regime. White House advisers appeared on TV talk shows and gave interviews to print reporters, explaining the reason the U.S. needed to preemptively invade Iraq. The media weakened in their journalistic integrity as mainstream outlets practically and unilaterally bought the White House’s bottom line, telling the American public about the threat of Iraq as related to the War on Terror, and thus insisting on the connection between 9/11, Al Qaeda and an entirely unrelated state-based regime. Five and a half years later, the Pentagon would report that there had been no connection or alliance between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. What then, accounted for the weak reporting, the soft questions, and the reiteration of White House bombast and oratory? I believe it was fear and patriotism under conditions of the State of Exception.

Three weeks after the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. led a coalition of American and NATO military forces into Afghanistan. American patriotism amplified to levels unseen since soldiers returned from Europe in 1945 following V-E Day. In the initial months of success of the war in Afghanistan, Bush officials were covertly researching and examining how the U.S. could make a claim that linked Al Qaeda to Saddam

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Hussein’s Iraq. Many Americans thought of Iraq as a rogue country, and one who threatened American security not necessarily based on direct evidence, but because of the decade between the end of the Gulf War and 9/11. In this decade, Iraq demonstrated, “noncompliance with international arms inspections,” and, “open support for Palestinian suicide bombers,” which proved to America and allied nations on the War on Terror that Saddam Hussein’s Iraq remained a credible threat to international security. Many TV news programs obtained interviews with Vice President Cheney, Secretary of State Powell, and National Security Adviser Rice, who all trumpeted the White House speech that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction, and if left unencumbered by U.S. force, he would eventually use them. Americans, reeling from the attacks of 2001, bought Condoleezza Rice’s claim that, “[w]e don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.” The Bush Administration had learned from, “the events of September 11th […] that the unthinkable could happen- if a threat was plausible, it should now be thought of as probable.” So when the Administration hardliners preached about the necessity of invading Iraq, the majority of Americans soon supported the second front in the War on Terror.

But because the War in Iraq, like the one in Afghanistan, was predicated on the idea that the United States had entered a new era in foreign relations, the public

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11 Western, 178.
12 The new era of foreign relations is based on the Bush rhetoric which divides the world into terrorist binaries, “You’re either with us or with the terrorists.” See footnote 18.
and governmental rhetoric questioned the patriotism of citizens who showed anything less than complete support. Such views to the War on Terror were quickly labeled unpatriotic, showing how freedom of speech can dissolve under a State of Exception, as democracies are reshaped to appear more like a totalitarian state. There was an idea bolstered by the White House and the Pentagon in the planning stage and initial months in both wars: that the security risks were too high to debrief the public about planning for the wars, so the public need to trust that the wars were being fought for legitimate reasons. In this environment, the government effectively tells the public, and the press, that only the inside members of the Bush Administration can handle the authentic concerns state of security.\textsuperscript{13} The mindset is piercingly reminiscent of a proverb from the days of the Soviet Union: the less you know the better you sleep.

The Bush White House kept the Fourth Estate dependent on White House sanctioned sources, and therefore gullibly swallowing the Rumsfeldian view of the war. The press could lose access to their sources if they balked at the Beltway rhetoric, frightened about severing their ties to White House insiders as, “many journalists relied extensively on sources within the administration and were reluctant to jeopardize their access to the White House.”\textsuperscript{14} Since the U.S. invasion, the media has been criticized for their (mostly) unequivocal initial support of the war, which showed their inability to deliver independent stories and sources about the American

\textsuperscript{13} “You want the truth? You can’t handle the truth.” As discussed in Chapter’s Two’s case about the spectacle of the “Mission Accomplished,” production, President Bush showed his penchant for impersonating the Tom Cruise movie, \textit{Top Gun}. Apparently, Bush’s fondness for Cruise cinema does not stop there. Inside the State of Exception, the public effectively surrenders to the omnipotent knowledge of the government when we accept that we’re not privy to national security concerns. Like when Tom Cruise interrogates Jack Nicholson in \textit{A Few Good Men} about the killing of a fellow Marine, Nicholson’s famous refrain “You can’t handle the truth,” is eerily applicable to the mantra of today’s U.S. state. Also to note: the crime in \textit{A Few Good Men} takes place in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Life imitating art?

\textsuperscript{14} Western, 206.
invasion. Indeed the journalists in Iraq were under “strict control”\textsuperscript{15} by the Department of Defense; if they sought out their own sources they could lose their visas. The domestic reporters who used the White House sources depended generally, “on either U.S. government sources or on members of the Iraqi dissident community, all of who had significant biases in favor of overthrowing Saddam Hussein.”\textsuperscript{16} Therefore by using the White House sources, the press delivered news stories slanted toward the opinions held by the administration. The news media, in both broadcast and in print, delivered the White House’s garbled message on the urgency of invasion. Questions were left unasked, and the images that came out of Iraq in the first weeks of war, up to the time of Bush’s “Mission Accomplished,” speech, informed the public that the U.S. started a war with high risks, but one that we could end, when we brought security, democracy, and stability to Iraq and its region. Five years have passed since that point. No such objectives have been met.

Many media outlets supported the build-up and justification for war. They continued to support the war through The Battle of Baghdad in the first weeks of April 2003 (when Saddam, his sons, and close cohorts, fled the city), and they supported President Bush’s decision that our mission in Iraq had been “Accomplished” by May 1\textsuperscript{st} of that same year. Many in the media have retracted their original support for the war,\textsuperscript{17} now deeming the Iraq war as unwinable, and a Vietnam-like quagmire. The change between the mostly devoted press of Bush foreign policy in 2001-2003, to the critical press, who is much more attracted to

\textsuperscript{15} Western, 212.
\textsuperscript{16} Western, 214.
exposing government and military blunders in 2008, occurred through small shifts, until the Bush-Cheney premise of invasion finally fell apart.

The vulnerability that so many Americans felt following the terrorist attacks cannot be underestimated. An authentic, and almost collective, surge of patriotism and nationalism reverberated through popular culture, thanks in part to the presence of American flags in many public arenas, including TV. In November of 2001 Bush addressed his countrymen and the allied nations from an antiterrorism conference saying, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." This rendering of an ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ world divided the globe into Americans and their friends, and the terrorists who wanted to annihilate both. The press was afraid not to bite the White House bait, which led to submissive reporting in the initial months of the war in Iraq. Many in the media recorded the success of removing the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, while also remembering the speed of the Gulf War, and came to a conclusion that a quick victory, removing Saddam and clearing Iraq of weapons of mass destruction, was a war we could win. The images which proliferated in the first few months: Iraqis handing soldiers flowers, defaced Saddam relics littering the streets of Baghdad, and of course, the triumphant Mission Accomplished landing, attempted to wrap the war up in a mere three months, and award the U.S. another Victory in wartime. The months following Bush’s declaration of Mission Accomplished so not reflect a completed war, troop levels remained steady, and sectarian violence began.

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Suddenly, less sanitized images started to come out of the theatre of war. The press and the public began to wonder about the delusions President Bush possessed when he made his congratulatory speech in his now famous “Top Gun” costume, complete with what appears to be a codpiece or other form of padding. In the second half of 2003, images in the news depicted looters raiding Baghdad, that the electrical system in that city was severely damaged, a suicide bomber destroying the U.N. headquarters in Baghdad, and a bomb wrecking a major Shiite mosque in Najaaf. At this point, the press began to critically assess whether our mission in Iraq really had been accomplished. In the second half of 2003, adverse images began to surface out of Iraq. Such images set the stage for Abu Ghraib, and the other detrimental images that began to seep into the American consciousness.

The Gulf War was a short war, making it a fitting subject for display on television. The major U.S. military presence in the Gulf War lasted only six weeks. The Iraq War, however, lacks the televisual qualities that made the Gulf War a successful news story. The current war in Iraq, much like the war in Vietnam, continues to drag on longer than anticipated, and without a foreseeable end in sight, we no longer know if our war can bring peace and stability to Iraq, or when our troops can come home. The Iraq War and the Vietnam War are also alike in that their lengths correlate to the exposure of bad events picked up by the press. Like Vietnam, as the

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war in Iraq continues, the media presence stationed in the area continues to mediate events which showcase the multifarious obstacles the U.S. must overcome to obtain a victory.

In 2004 disturbing events in Iraq thrust the U.S. public to consider the power of wartime imagery. In the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib scandal and the horrifying killing of Americans in Fallujah, the public relied on the press to mediate the images that come attached to news stories. The events showcased wanton acts, provoking citizens to depend on authoritative sources to make sense of the meanings of such acts. Both events asked viewers to acknowledge the way different sides in war struggle for power by humiliating, injuring, and killing their enemies. As the press covered these two disturbing events, the public became aware of the literal renderings of bloody war. These image-inundated news stories came to show how, “[p]hoto- graphs usually appear with a news story, and the text of the story will anchor the meaning of the photograph, supporting some readings of the photograph while discounting others.”

The Fallujah story discounted the idea perpetuated by Vice President Dick Cheney who promised before the war began that, “we will, in fact, be treated as liberators.” The arrival of images like ones that came out of the events in Fallujah, and the scandal at Abu Ghraib, forced ordinary citizens to ask whether their country’s war is worth the sacrifices.

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The images that were released by the killings at Fallujah, similar to the ones released with Abu Ghraib, need an authoritative reading so that the public can make sense of them. TV news and newspapers methodically analyze the photos, images, or video that accompany their stories, so that the viewer does not intuit his or her own reading. The display of bloodshed at Fallujah depended on interpretation from reliable television news correspondents, since instinctually, the viewer may not know how to make sense of the photographs. As Bignell puts it, “in TV news, it is extremely rare for pictures to be shown without accompanying voice-over by an institutional voice,”22 a lesson the U.S. learned in Vietnam when the press released pictures of American coffins. The voices on the television act as an authority figure to interpret barbaric images of barbaric slayings or wrongdoings. These institutional voices explain the extreme malice in slaying Americans, while also contextualizing the story as to why the Iraqis resented the presence of the Americans. Since the majority of the public and the press supported the war in the beginning, with the new

22 Bignell, 122.
saturation of offensive images, traditional journalists lost some of their public’s trust since they seemingly supported the invasion. A disconnect arose between the television audience and the TV news anchor. After the promise of guaranteed victory in Iraq, Americans began to consider the credibility of news networks, prompting them to ask, were they a relic of a past era? With the viral outbreak of new media, the Internet gained credibility in the public eye. Its instantaneous updates, and the plethora of news outlets that the Internet provides, allowed Americans to begin to comprehend the War in Iraq through the daily web searches.

After a succession of negative events covered by the press in late 2003 and into 2004, the Pentagon and the White House began to lose their trustworthiness with their promise to the public for a short war. Bush’s foreign policy promises to increase global security by bringing democracies to oppressed parts of the world. So if his policy has the opposite effect, by unleashing violent uprisings, Americans rely on the press to act on their behalf by demanding a leader to mitigate the effects of his foreign policy. Since, “In a country in which political leaders are held accountable for their decisions by an electorate, violence simply cannot- as it can in totalitarian countries- exist in the raw.”

As more Americans became aware of the explosive situation in Iraq, blogs gained popularity and authority as an outlet that might explain the war in more accurate terms than the L’Ancien Régime of TV news. The war in Iraq came to be a very divisive issue, with many Americans sticking to the premise that Iraq was a warranted front in the War on Terror, while others believing the Bush Administration presented fake evidence to gain congressional, and public, support for an invasion.

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An attractive quality of the blogs is their lack of top-down directed news, as “[t]he blog movement reflects the Internet itself. The structure is not hierarchical, but connective, power coming from the aggregate and through the decision of an elite.”

In recent years, the War on Terror has been constructed as an issue that the Republicans and Democrats would handle in starkly different ways. In this politically charged atmosphere, blogs gained popularity from their overt political leanings.

Blogs, like other forms of new media, allow the Internet user to contribute to the content of the site. After the press cowered to Presidential power before the invasion of Iraq, and continued in the first few months of the war, it became clearer to Americans the ways in which corporate interests sway mainstream news, as advertisers exercise influence, and these companies often contain business connections (through tax refunds or lobbying groups) to the White House. Such relationships can influence the critical lens used by a network in depicting the war.

As the war drags into its fifth year, and the original premise that linked Saddam to Al Qaeda has been officially denied, the Internet now appears as a more attractive sphere for the war’s coverage.

Trends in Internet technology often shape the way the public attains their information about the war. One such trend, known as viral video, or a viral news story, displays the technological benefits of Internet media in the 21st century. Viral Internet news stories, or videos, appear on a webpage; and quickly this digital product passes through the Internet connections of millions users; when it is finally picked up by mainstream media. TV news attempts to appropriate the meaning of the original content, making it relevant for a TV broadcast. By the time a news network

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broadcasts the content of viral videos in a traditional TV broadcast, countless discussions, postings, and links have already emerged in the blogs that attract a news-hungry population to the content. A common characteristic of viral videos is how particular Internet users pass along the content of viral communication to particular friends, colleagues, family and other social networks that they think would enjoy the video or news story. The effect of such Internet driven stories harms the authority in the top-down hierarchy of news organizations, as they need approval from producers or executives before they broadcast the information. The process and effects of constantly updating news draws in a heavy load of Internet traffic and makes the web a place for independent, and often more real-time, postings on the war. The immediate nature of Internet news transformed the digital sphere into a democratic space, where any users can discuss, debate, and change their ideas, concerns, criticisms or support of the war.

Now that the war in Iraq has reached a point of near quagmire, and now that the population has turned a critical eye towards the war and its (false) premises, the Internet has become a more appropriate sphere to display sordid daily events in Iraq. The Internet, like Iraq (or even Vietnam’s “Jungle”), exists as an unregulated region of communication, and a place where U.S. superpower strength cannot seem to separate the dangerous from the mundane. The casualties, covert operations, and sectarian struggles (the complexity of which undergoes a paring down in television news) attain a comprehensive rendering in the Internet, as a zone without traditional censors and advertisers. The television medium brings events from other regions of
the world, into the sanitized privacy of American homes.\footnote{Bignell, 125.} The Internet, as a sphere devoid of tangible boundaries, suits the paradigm for the War on Terror, as a place of shadows, caves, and enemies without national uniforms. Due to constant technological upgrades on the Internet, the web appears as a more evolved media sphere to represent the War on Terror. The end of the Iraq War is thus far unknowable, but the public still wants to know, what is our aim in this war? Under the Bush Administration our forces need to stay in Iraq until a functioning democratic government can take over, and when all Iraqi citizens attain freedom in their apolitical lives too. This ideological quest for Iraqi Freedom continues to garner criticism as it appears as an objective that requires more support than military force alone. As more years transpire in the War in Iraq, a problem of representing the war in the traditional media has arisen. The continued violence and casualties that continue in Iraq, occasionally interlaced by Iraqi democratic strides, make it hard for the media to represent the conflict in terms other than “stalemate,” or as “an impasse,” even if/while boasting of the “small gains.”

III. The Digital Theatre of War

Since only a small minority of Americans enlists in the Army, or view first hand sights of war, the public most easily consumes war when it is represented in understandable terms and images through popular culture. The term the Theatre of War implies war as a visible event, one that occurs in a specific physical space. It is important to distinguish the particulars of a war from the universal attributes given to
the idea of War. The idealized and nostalgic images of War in recent popular culture relate more to the ancient societies of Athens and Sparta than it does to mechanized modernity. When we consider these societies, one can picture handsome hoplites carrying spears and shields, risking their lives to protect commanding kings. In 21\textsuperscript{st} century warfare, this type of unified imagery is much harder to picture. All wars though World War II (what America calls its last “Good War”) popular culture dictated that our soldiers fought with dignity, protecting the core values of the United States. After World War II, our military earned an idealized place in our culture; an ideal attacked by our efforts in Vietnam, as the U.S. entered a tryingly long war that continued with out a foreseeable resolution. The images of burning villages, and the presence of American men returning home often paralyzed, injured, or in a coffin, forced the civilian public, and the citizen journalists who reported to ask, was this war worth fighting?

The Theatre of War also implies performative aspects of warfare. In war, the stage where the action takes place is a geographical region, the plot moves forward depending on the dueling sides, various actors add to the activity of the war depending on their personal agenda, while wearing uniforms (like costumes) that denote rank. We can also compare war to theater when considering the lengths the head military leaders go (like directors or investors of a play) to convince the public about the necessary viability of the war. Typically, civilians understand war though “the signs and symbols of its depiction, [the public’s] impressions [are] derived not from the battles in distant lands but from the manner they are rendered at home.”\footnote{Robin Andersen, \textit{A Century of Media, A Century of War} (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2006), xvi.}
Another set of images that narrated a story of American dissent with the war in Vietnam came from the representation of anti-war protests that took place across America. The biased coverage of the demonstrations showed that these, “demonstrations, even peaceful protests, were criticized editorially [as the] coverage also led to a distorted sense of how many Americans actually opposed U.S. policies in Vietnam.”

After the Tet Offensive in 1968, over fifty percent of the nation supported the war. Yet the mélange of symbols that emerged through the later period of the Vietnam War pictured a different state of affairs. The images that derive from a battlefield or from the homeland during wartime make war into a visual entity. Because of this, Americans choose whether to support such a war. It is the job of the President to urge for the necessity of this particular war.

Presidential administrations can counter negative images that come out of the Fourth Estate by propagating their own series of symbols into the cultural stratosphere. When the public encountered dark images of body bags and destroyed Vietnam villages, the public began to consider the consequences for the United States. A similar series of images from the war in Iraq depict dueling realties of the war. The White House website (http://www.whitehouse.gov) charts the progress of the Presidency with monthly news releases. Each month of President Bush’s two terms receives its own webpage, and inside that page the major events on the President’s agenda obtain headlines and bullet points, that link to another page. The designers of the White House site cannily realize that to connote certain ideas about the success of the Bush presidency, strong images of the Commander in Chief can

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best explain this point. In this way, the White House adapts to the technology of the 21st century, while using the Internet to put forward a singular objective.

By searching the White House website, one sees how the administration combines technology and wartime imagery to represent the status and role of Iraq as an imperative fight for freedom. The way in which the President addresses the nation about the status of the War in Iraq reveals his convictions about our military’s strength, and his belief that to change the direction of a certain type of Middle East fanaticism we should bring (or impose) the political ideologies of Western democracies. In every year but 2005, on the anniversary of the invasion of Iraq, President Bush delivered a speech on the subject of the war in Iraq and the larger spectrum of the War on Terror. In 2004, the President spoke at the White House in front of the U.N. Security Council; in 2006 President Bush gave an address to the City Club of Cleveland, Ohio; in 2007 he spoke in the Roosevelt Room of the White House, and in 2008 he delivered remarks at the Pentagon. In Image 4, the White House showcases the President in front of a portrait of the stalwart President Theodore Roosevelt in a pose inspired by his “Rough Riders” caricature. This image clearly indicates the White House’s wish to associate President Bush’s foreign policy regarding the War on Terror with President Roosevelt’s stance to expand American influence to Cuba, the Southern American Continent, and the Philippines. When President Bush stands under the portrait of President Roosevelt, he asks for parallels to be drawn between the Bush Doctrine, and the Monroe Doctrine that Teddy Roosevelt so ardently upheld. Under the Monroe Doctrine, the U.S. asserted its right
to influence the entire Western Hemisphere. Roosevelt’s Corollary to the doctrine asserted the U.S.’s right to interfere in the politics of Latin America, quite similar to the way the Bush Doctrine now patrols the Middle East to ensure those states operate with policies friendly towards the U.S. This image asks the American public to entrust in the American ideology that rewards independent masculinity, as the presidents who enforce military might without hesitation, bring a greater peace and prosperity to the American nation.

The Pentagon and the White House benefited from the way that mainstream media outlets broadcast the invasion of Iraq. The cable TV news networks nearly overdosed from the blatant American imagery that emblazoned their news segments, filled with soaring eagles, red, white and blue, and of course, news correspondents.
donning American flag pins. Any American who turned on their TV set in the first few weeks of war to receive updates about Iraq would have to make a conscious decision not to imbibe the Americana-run-amok Kool-Aid, and find their news from an alternative source. The hypnotic effect of quick edits and over-processed graphics distanced the audience of cable news from the costs of war: death and injuries. When the collective American celebration of “Iraqi Freedom” subsided in the later months of 2003 and in the five years that have followed, the White House needed to resurrect a sense of purpose for our war in the Middle East. As opposed to traditional broadcast journalism, which produces pieces for broadcast only after an ascertainable and meaningful event happens, ordinary citizens run blogs in which they post images that are, “deemed by Western news organizations to be too disturbing to screen,” yet that were, “being actively sought out by vast numbers of people via online search engines.”

Though the Pentagon officially censored pictures of American coffins leaving Iraq, the concern and curiosity for the images that depict the more upsetting costs of war did not disappear for the eyes of the American public. The public turned to the Internet medium to find the more underground, uncensored, and (perceived) authentic reportage.

Regarding the theatrical work of “Mission Accomplished,” or the images pictured on the White House website, the Bush Administration makes sure to disseminate images which can inculcate ideas of military strength, while assuring an eventual victory in Iraq, into the conscious of the American public. On the White House website, the May 2003 webpage conspicuously leaves out an image of the “Mission Accomplished,” banner, an image rendered in so many other pictures from

that day. Even though the White House devotes a webpage to release President Bush’s speech titled, “Major Operations in Iraq Have Ended,” the press secretary edits the history of that day to leave out the fact that the president explicitly declared Mission Accomplished.

After a lull of evidence in the latter half of 2003 to defend President Bush’s claim that the mission actually had been accomplished, the Pentagon scored a big win when special military forces captured Saddam Hussein on December 14, 2003. This success worked well into the Bush Administration’s narrative of the war: we had gone into Iraq to liberate the Iraqis, and we had done so when we apprehended Hussein into our custody. The U.S. administrator in Iraq, L. Paul Bremmer III, told the American public, “we got him,” in a breaking news conference, and skirted any discussion about the location of Osama bin Laden. Suddenly, bin Laden had been nearly displaced from the narrative of the War on Terror, making Iraq the urgent priority. With this large gain made in the war, the military quickly released pictures they seemingly believed perpetuated a vision of success. However, a somewhat strange image emerged into the pop culture stratosphere when the military released a picture of Hussein undergoing a supposed dental examination. The army released this picture as it in accordance with their desire to spread images with specific and singular interpretations about war. This image of Saddam reveals a weakened and fallen tyrant. In Image 5, Saddam Hussein, the man the U.S. once pegged as a merciless dictator, appeared like an infantile miscreant.

This image circulated quickly through newspapers, magazines, television broadcasts, and also the Internet. American officials released an accompanying video of Hussein sitting in custody of coalition forces with an unkempt beard and emotionless face. In the video Saddam appears extremely compliant with the examination, even sedated. While viewing the picture of Saddam receiving an oral examination, one wonders, why the military choose this image to circulate: were Saddam Hussein’s cavities a threat to national security? Rather, I would suggest that it seems since “[t]he meaning of ‘major combat operations’ in Iraq was shaped and understood through a set of entertainment frameworks that made the images more convincing and compelling than the actual unpleasantness of war,”30 American officials released this video to work inside the entertainment framework. It was also distributed to give evidence to the Iraqis that the Americans captured Saddam, and now the dictator was subject to bodily probing by the Americans. Since the Pentagon limited the release of unpleasant images by journalists (like American coffins),

30 Andersen, xxvi.
Americans could accept that the war in Iraq was won in six weeks. At that point, there was little popular evidence to dispute that claim. Or, perhaps, when President Bush declared our “major combat operations” in Iraq in a display of grandeur, Americans readily read this format as another display of reality TV: a format many Americans enjoy for its voyeuristic pleasures, but also a form that sophisticated TV watchers identify as directed as a 30-minute fictional sitcom.

21st century communications parlay the infinite outlets of information available to citizens with an Internet connection. Multifarious organizations, individuals, and agendas contribute to the digital theatre of war. Whereas in World War I and World War II, the sovereign president and the newspaper headline informed the public about the war, this method of releasing information fell apart in Vietnam. For in Vietnam, the news industry still possessed undisputed authority, since only three U.S. networks had news bureaus set up in Saigon. What the government did not account for was the way that the televisual representations of the war would sway public opinion. This was controlled in the Gulf War when CNN reporters covered the conflict from the Iraqi capital and described for their audience up to the moment accounts of the aerial bombing.31 In the War in Iraq, when the war received the attention of millions of web pages, the digital representation changed how citizens consume wars, therein creating new problems for government officials.

The War in Iraq shows how the independent human agent has entered the translation of war from the arena of conflict to the sphere of broadcast. As more Americans update blogs, and add content to Internet websites, they potentially change

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how their surrounding society thinks about the war in Iraq. Rey Chow examines how
an increasingly digital world further transforms Communicative Action\textsuperscript{32} into a
publicly operated sphere as, “the world in which the place of knowledge was once
securely occupied by the sovereign has now given way to a world in which man
himself has entered the picture.”\textsuperscript{33} The nature of the Internet brings once unknown
corners of the world into representable terms through digital imaging. Search engines
now return queries with images of related terms, thus retrieving returning pictures of
foreign items for the user, ones that previously might have been ignored by the
television.

The virtual characteristics of the Iraq War have their origins in the Cold War. The virtual fighting of the Cold War “meant competing with the enemy for the
stockpiling, rather than actual use, of preclusively horrifying weaponry.”\textsuperscript{34} Though it
seems more applicable to question virtual images rather than virtual aggression when
discussing the Iraq War, the U.S. and Al Qaeda, as well as other terrorist
organizations, virtually fight in the same sense of the Cold War’s use of the word.
When a new video of Osama bin Laden surfaces on television news or on the Internet,
bin Laden engages in a form of virtual fighting where he makes sure the U.S. still
recognizes his persona and his power as an antagonistic system we should consider
threatening. His face taunts the U.S. military forces, demanding for them to
acknowledge how six and a half years after 9/11, the leader of Al Qaeda still operates
with relative freedom over the terrorist network. The rhetoric surrounding the War on

\textsuperscript{32} A term by Jürgen Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action Volume 2 Lifeworld and
\textsuperscript{33} Chow, 3.
\textsuperscript{34} Chow, 33.
Terror also constantly refers to the virtual- not the present or the tangible- but the lurking, ever-present desire for the terrorists to annihilate us.

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The Bush Administration and the Department of Defense ultimately cannot unanimously convince the public about their narrative that constructs the gains made in the War in Iraq. No matter if gains are made on the ground, somewhere on the Internet, a webpage proclaims a different story. The politicization of the Internet leads its users to customize their consumption of the war. When an Internet user finds a website to match his or her own political likings, that user comprehends that source of news as a more authentic rendering of the conflict in Iraq. Instead of the TV reporter who brings the war to you in your living room, you can now independently and privately, search on the Internet to find your compatible version of the war, and nearly any other aspect in life. The more sophisticated Internet users, who use the Internet to obtain their news about Iraq, ostensibly understand the scope of the Internet. This means that the Internet user accepts that his rendering of the war, via searching webpages, news sites, and blogs, only represents a fragment of the gigantic sum of Internet journalism.

This 21st century method of analyzing your surrounding world, through the Internet and other computer devices, separates the younger generations from their predecessors. A tradition of older generations, where friends and a family sat down to watch the television as a unit, is increasingly replaced by friends sitting down with their individual laptops, while (maybe) the TV plays in the background. To check on the status of news, the younger generation searches online for the answer. Though
the laptop and the Internet seemingly posses limitless ways to explore and understand the world, Internet searches exists as a passive action since, “the eye and hand have gradually withdrawn their power and relinquished them to machine [and in this way] the concept of the interface comes to define, both figuratively and literally, the mechanic connectivity of digital culture.” Internet viewing is both passive and active, as exploring the Internet consists of pointing, clicking, and beholding the information, thus resigning the content of the Internet to the citizens who contribute to web pages. The digital dimensions of the Internet can be understood when we consider that what we view online is only a splinter of the total Internet. This digital nature menacingly stares at us from behind the computer screen; we are unable to physically grasp it. This proves to be a useful way of considering how the Internet affects our comprehension of the Iraq War. No media talking head, blogger, or newspaper editorialist can posses the power, privilege, and sway that a reporter like Walter Cronkite possessed a generation ago. Americans increasingly distrust their sources of information. The Internet shows how many outlets one can turn to understand their world, highlighting that the sites one chooses to read only brims the surface of the immense complexities to wars, foreign lands, and global politics.

Since the initial reasons we invaded Iraq have been officially denied or seriously put into question, what does say about President Bush’s premise that the United States exists in an extraordinary state of peril? This state of law demands that extra sacrifices are needed to defend America in the War on Terror. Should we understand the Americans killed in Iraq as lives lost in vain? No one wants to

understand our war in that manner. Since the Pentagon itself has officially debunked
the Al Qaeda- Hussein connection, the basis for our invasion no longer attains a hint
of controversy, as media talking heads replay this information on cable news. While
for the Americans who initially questioned the war, this understanding of Washington
deceit attracts a blasé or cynical response of, “no big surprise,” they move on in their
daily lives, continuing to distrust the Bush Administration. But for the members of
the American public who remember the loud beat of war drums in early 2003, and
decided to adhere to the decisions of their commander in chief, the understanding that
the we based the War in Iraq on either faulty evidence or on a bald lie strikes a very
dissonant chord. Consequently, this tension between the public and their government
inspires this group of citizens to understand the War in Iraq through their private
Internet searches and sources, biased bloggers, and therein interpreting the war in
their own terms. American citizens who have come to distrust the government in the
past five years can now find Internet validation of their opinions. How can this part of
the American public reconcile this discontent with the war? The conflict arises for the
group that now reads the war as an explicitly aggressive form of foreign policy, rather
than a preemptive method undertaken to suppress an attack from Saddam Hussein.

The Internet affords the public a personal way of understanding the war
through individual texts, images, and sources. Since many Americans privately
viewed digital images from the War in Iraq, or at least viewed them with out
traditional mediation from an authoritative source, the effect of how our society
comes to memorialize this war remains unknown. Where in the past we indulged in:
the wide range of sites and media through which remembering (and forgetting) [war] occur[ed] in a public sphere, consciously and unconsciously, through film and television, photographs, and advertisements, radio and song, theater, museums, exhibits, tourist spots, fictions, ceremonial, school curricula, political speeches as so on,\textsuperscript{36}

the 21\textsuperscript{st} century process of memorializing war is now undoubtedly different. Now, in the present era, the digital commodification of war disrupts the traditional process of commemorating. We do not yet know what archiving method future historians might use in recording our digital history. If these historians found the relics from the White House website, they could piece together that the Iraq War was an urgent call to defend Freedom worldwide. But even if they came across the cache of White House sanctioned images that tell the story of a brave, defiant, and respected American president, surely future archivists will encounter digital documents that record and contain memories that tell about the widespread critique of the War in Iraq; as such will be the future anterior archive. We do not know the lifespan of digital imagery regarding how long such images, information, and websites, will stay online as saved data. In the digital era, man acts as the ultimate transcriber. When the space of the Internet opened up and appeared as a sphere where any person could contribute the content, the telling of history through journalism and news was no longer in the hands of the elite. This process puts pressure on the White House to explain their motivation for originally going to war, and also forces the White House to act responsibly to the American public and debrief them on future plans, whether domestic or foreign. If the White House does not reveal their agenda to the public, they know that a blogger, or other Fourth Estate outlet, will readily release critical

information about the President, since he is (now) widely known to trick the public on occasion.

The Internet changed the way we process and comprehend the world. Wherein previous wars, civilians relegated the theatre of war to the military, the government, and the press that reported on each, today we comprehend war as a public and nearly instantaneous event. Due to the advancements of the Internet, many people have digitally public lives. Through social networking sites, and through sharing one’s life with digital pictures, many people choose to put themselves on display. This affects Washington policy and the rhetoric of the Bush Administration. The public demands a legible image to represent our war. Though Americans initially consented to Bush’s outrageous display of power in his “Mission Accomplished,” landing, many citizens now want Bush’s Administration to change their rhetoric surrounding the war and admit that the initial promises for a swift victory, a pleased Iraqi public, and removing terrorists from Iraq were promises the U.S. government never possessed the intelligence or credibility to make. In the digital age, images connote more than words, and when the public reads these images, they will intuit their own meanings from as well as ascribe their own meanings to them. When the public no longer relies on traditional media, or hired journalists to ascertain their ideas about world affairs, the government cannot easily persuade the public to agree with their narrative. In fact, citizens have begun to construe their own narrative for the invasion, and the digital imprints that this history impresses for the future may not look favorably upon our leaders.
Conclusion

“Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than ten thousand bayonets.”
Napoleon Bonaparte

One of the first items of research for my thesis was to find the doctrine that disallowed pictures of coffins coming home from Iraq. I wanted to find the Bush Administration’s explanation for why citizens should not or could not view such honest representations of war. This task took surprisingly little time, as I found an online link to Department of Defense Directive 5122.5. The directive simply states, without pretension or guarded rhetoric, that no pictures of injured or dead service people can be released by media sources. The directive aims—or so it claims—to protect the privacy of the soldier’s family. In one plain directive from the Department of Defense, Americans were subsequently cut off from understanding this war in all its representational and real complexities. I read how this directive attempts to curtail the free-flow of information, and as an Internet-dependent citizen, I knew that the directive would meet resistance. Internet technology keeps evolving. As the increasingly Internet-savvy public continues to add new content, collaborate with other web users, and update online software, the Internet persists as an open space for both textual and visual exchange. I use the Internet to share information, contribute to blogs, learn more about personal interests, and of course, read about world events. Naturally, as soon as I learned the way in which the government went about restricting photographed coffins, I foresaw that in the place of those coffins, there were images that the government could not in fact restrict and that an onslaught of truly violent imagery existed on the Internet.
On the five-year anniversary of our invasion of Iraq, the *New York Times* website added several online posts to discuss commemorative issues regarding the anniversary. A digital slideshow appeared on the website which pictured the soldiers who have earned Purple Hearts in Iraq. It was hard to look through these pictures, and as I did, my stomach turned. A sergeant is pictured with a reconstructed face to fix the area where a bomb blew up his scalp; a man is shown sitting on his bed and exposing his prosthetic leg, another soldier stands at dusk—he lost his vision and the use of both his legs. At the beginning of this thesis I naively questioned why the costs of war couldn’t simply be publicized in both mainstream and critical media outlets. I believed that the public should know what this war has done to so many in the armed forces. But as I delved deeper into caches of Internet mages, experiencing the rawness of the violence, the bloodiness of the death, I understood why our government censors the depiction of war. I did not support the censorship, but I understood it.

Photographs, in their flatness, and in their instantaneous nature, display a strange representation of life. When you encounter a picture of yourself, an instinct inside usually says, “That’s what I look like?” as if you are being shown your face and body for the first time. Blake Stimson writes in his work *The Pivot of the World*—which discusses Post-World War II photography exhibits—that in photographs there exists a “boundary confusion […] between [the] authentic and [the] inauthentic.”¹ Applying this idea to a photograph of yourself makes sense: a photo of

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you is only a representation; you are the authentic form, the body and the mind, the human. But when we consider violent imagery, the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic is a harder idea to apply. When terrorists post violent videos or photos online, they are presenting authentic versions of death, which are meant to shock the American audience. Such images produce not a strange form of identification with the image, as in one’s self image, but a difficult dis-identification with the reality of violence and/in representation. Should these sorts of images be accessible by any viewer willing or naïve enough to seek them out? The YouTube site requires that their viewers are 18 or older before viewing any graphic videos. Of course, there is no way YouTube can authenticate if their users are the age they claim to be. This seems to be the paradox of Internet imagery: anyone can access them, but sometimes this desire to educate oneself and read the images takes one beyond the critical or emotional capabilities necessary to distance ourselves from death and violence and thus be able to reflect on and understand them.

We use photography to differentiate the individual from the community, or to represent many individuals as one whole subject. To illustrate this idea, recall the picture of President Bush in Chapter 3, where he stands in the Roosevelt Room and addresses the nation on the fourth anniversary of the War in Iraq. He is pictured standing alone to emphasize his sovereign and singular status; his authority reigns over the military and the public. To understand how photographs are used to picture many bodies as a whole subject, consider the image in Chapter 2 that shows the naval servicemen on board the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln. The members of the navy stand in front of President Bush as he makes his “Mission Accomplished”
speech. In this photo, the individual bodies of the soldiers appear more like one mass composite subject-object, rather than individuated bodies with minds and lives of their own. This photo thus depersonalizes the soldiers. It is similar to the hidden coffins in that we cannot attach faces or lives to the soldiers so represented. In a similar way, Americans without direct connections to service members can only regard the American deaths in Iraq impersonally and the Bush Administration aims to keep it that way. The mass representation of the soldiers on the aircraft carrier shows their loyalty en masse for the President, and their support for the mission in Iraq.

I have argued that the nation has understood the narrative of the Iraq War through the major images that have emerged from it—whether by legitimate sanction or new media. The method and context of by means of which the particular images have emerged changes the way the images have been and, in the future, will be received. Though the Internet has the potential to display less sanitized versions of war, the Internet has now entered a more corporate and mainstream stage as the empires of Rupert Murdoch, Bill Gates, and the ubiquity of Google appropriate once individually owned and home-operated sites. Already, in the short history of the Internet, certain websites have begun to comply more with regulations of traditional news sources. Newspaper websites, for instance, try to adapt to digital media by incorporating journalist’s blogs, multimedia slideshows, and user-forums where their audience can post thoughts, while the main content of the site still displays newspaper-appropriate imagery. This sort of website works well for an Internet user who was born in the TV-news generation but wants to adapt to Internet technology. If the population who was raised by TV news but has adapted to the Internet in their
midlife senses a rift between the news anchor and the story on the ground, a traditional news source’s website lets them adjust to user-added content while staying safely within the parameters of traditional news.

Over the course of my argument I have questioned, “Is there any way that the majority of Americans are still convinced of our right to have begun this war?” It seems that in the backlash of violence, killed service people, sacrificed journalists, the sectarian breakdown of Iraq, and the region’s growing instability, it has become undeniable that our mission in Iraq is a failure if not entirely in military terms then surely in diplomatic and political terms. If the U.S. were not a democracy, and the press only operated as a state run service, the public could be convinced that the war is just, and that the Americans are winning. However, one of America’s most basic constitutional foundations is a free press. By restricting the images we have discussed, the Bush Administration has attempted to curtail Americans’ ability to access information from a free press, thus violating of one of the most fundamental principles of our republic. The prevalence of upsetting news stories, the depressed and post-traumatic-stress torn veterans, the political leaders who now recant their initial support, and the rising patronage of political blogs, all conspire to make it seem that the Americans who keep track of news stories must admit what an irreconcilable and contradictory mission Iraq has become. This notion is bereft of promise, as I want my country to regain both international prestige and respect by means other than those employed by a disastrous military policy. But the more I learn about the war, and the lack of initial planning that went into the occupation (especially in the post-Saddam stage), I acknowledge what a dangerous situation my country faces. I
believe that a precipitous American withdrawal from Iraq would embolden anti-
American terrorists, but I wonder whether our occupation doesn’t do much the same.
Is this a lose-lose situation? What will become of the future? What images can we
expect to find around the political corner?

The sharpening of my political consciousness since 9/11 has been a volatile
and uneven experience. I began as a pacifist who objected to the bombing of
Afghanistan. In 12th grade I joined protest groups to challenge the invasion of Iraq.
Since then, I have learned to read the war and foreign policy as a spectrum of
gradations that involves both diplomacy and military and non-military projections of
force. I have now learned that there are reasons—some understandable, most
sinister—behind the political control of images. Ours is not an idyllic state and it is
far from Plato’s Republic, but one of the main objectives of statehood, of course, is a
monopoly on violence, paradoxically enough, to prevent further violence. Such logic
is much the same as that informing the Cold War notion of MAD (mutually assured
destruction by nuclear means). America needs a military, and elected officials
(ideally) represent the best interest of the public. The Administration of George W.
Bush, like the one of George H.W. Bush, distance American citizens from “authentic”
representations of war in order to keep morale and public support high, and perhaps
even control and suppress dissent. Despite their occlusion of images of soldiers’
coffins, negative and even damning images have surfaced, and the population who
wants to critique the war now possesses more complex reasons and resources for their
dissent. Sheer censorship alone seems a far-off possibility for controlling the public’s
relation to a proliferating media. The essence of technology is that it continues to
improve, adapt, change, and spread. Citizens of the 21st century have become accustomed to lifestyles replete with instant upgrades and the possibility of sharing knowledge with other publics, nations, and peoples via the Internet. If the Bush Administration wants to separate the public from the story on the ground, they started this war in the wrong century, or at least the wrong decade. As any 21st century technophile could have warned the Administration, had they only had the smarts enough to ask, everything and anything always ends up on the Internet. There is no future in hiding information, as infinitely reproducible and spreadable information has become synonymous with communicative exchange that defines the early 21st century social body.
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