

Junkies addicted to suffering in a cynical world? (guest blog)

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For the first time ever the world has managed to see into the Delta base of the US army, the well-known Guantanamo military base. A [video](#) of a detainee in Guantanamo came to light showing Omar Khadr, 16 years old at the time, being interrogated by Canadian agents in order to give them more information about muslim extremists and possible attacks.



Mike Asikopoulos, a Polis Summer School student, reports.

Omar, was accused of killing an American soldier and injuring another by throwing a grenade and for having strong connections with Al Qaeda. The interrogation took place in February 2003 and it was only 5 years later that the video became public when Canada's Supreme Court ordered the army to give the video to the lawyers of Canadian Omar Khadr.



During the video we can see Omar expressing claims of torture and showing his scars, proving mistreatment. His lawyers also claim that he had been tortured by sleep deprivation for 3 weeks, the tactic of "frequent flyer" as it is better known.

Not front page news

But what struck me the most was that the media coverage and the public's reaction was not exactly what I was expecting. No newspaper mentioned it on first page. The Guardian had an article about it on page 17, the Independent on page 19, the Times page 28 and the Metro free press on page 11. As far as the New Media is concerned, not even a single online news organisation had it as a top story but mentioned it in the world section with a link of the video whilst BBC news online chose to place it in the Americas section. This underreporting resulted in the mild reaction of the audience/readers and allowing this story to be a 'days' story.

It was then when the [images](#) of prisoners in the [Abu Ghraib](#) prison being inhumanly [tortured](#) by American soldiers came to mind and what effect they had on the public. The whole world was shocked and immediate action was demanded.

No fury

But what is that makes these two similar cases so different and of different value as far as humanitarian action and public fury is concerned. What is that makes a torture picture more shocking than a video of a teenager being interrogated? Is it the use of shocking images? Reporting is not thought-provoking enough any more? Non violent images seem to exert no influence any more.. But is that the case?

When one of my friends saw the video, he reacted in a very interesting way. "so what?" he said, "we all know what's going on there and what an interrogation is like! Let alone, in this video they are treating him quite well..". Although Omar Khadr accuses the agents of mistreating him we have no visual proof of that.

Shock tactics

Although he showed his scars and his lawyers provided a huge amount of information, people are not convinced. We need images that shock us to believe! We need images to feel sympathy. What a sufferer claims is not enough, what he describes is not enough. The viewers need more drama, they need action! We need a certain amount of emotion to make us feel closer to the sufferer and do something about one's situation.

What my friend said without knowing the importance of it, is that we are all quite aware of what's going on in the world, or think we are. Regarding Guantanamo, for example, we had all been previously informed about the situation and the allegations of former detainees. Omar's story provided us with nothing important or new. There was no physical pain, not enough suffering to overcome our media fatigue. When one is bombarded with news like this every day, viewers reach a point where they are hypnotized and you need a scandal to wake them up again. It's a battle between the media/news fatigue and the shock.

Bread and circuses

I strongly believe that this trend is to blame for the new media world that we have ended up with. It's like the [Colosseum](#) in Ancient Rome. The blood-thirsty viewers needed to be shocked in order to act upon an issue. We act only when we see atrocities and we respond only to raw violence. Omar crying, Omar begging the soldiers to kill him and crying for help clearly is not enough. It's a cynical world that we live in and readers crave for more in order to be in the front page.

This article was by Mike Asikopoulos, a Polis Summer School student from Greece.

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