

# Images as weapons of war: representation, mediation and interpretation

BEN O'LOUGHLIN\*

**Abstract.** Belief that images have become the critical 'weapon' in contemporary warfare has enjoyed great currency in the past decade. This belief rests upon certain understandings about the impact visual footage of terrorist attacks or still images of the abuse of prisoners have had on public opinion in different parts of the world. These understandings, in turn, reflect simplistic models of representation and mediation in which citizens are assumed to know little of the 'true' situation of war but are easily and primarily shocked by unexpected graphic images. To explore these relationships, this article presents analysis of original research from a three-year study of military practitioners, media coverage of security events, and collaborative audience ethnography across towns and cities in the UK. While military practitioners feel frustration that communicating with publics is 'like talking to a brick wall', analysis of audience interpretations of Abu Ghraib and other events suggests varied and negotiated understandings in which audiences account for processes of mediation as well as reflect on the event being represented. Images cannot necessarily be considered primary to explaining how an individual interprets a news story, and, to the extent and manner in which images do matter, this often depends on what longer historical narratives such images are situated within – by media or audiences themselves. No image is intrinsically shocking. For policymakers concerned with public diplomacy, for journalists and for audiences themselves there is a need for further research into the role images – Weber's 'visual language' – play amid today's conditions of diffused war.

**Ben O'Loughlin** is Reader in International Relations and Co-Director of the New Political Communication Unit at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is Co-Editor of the journal *Media, War & Conflict* and author of *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War* (Polity, 2010) and *Television and Terror: Conflicting Times and the Crisis of News Discourse* (Palgrave, 2009), both with Andrew Hoskins. Ben can be contacted at: {Ben.OLoughlin@rhul.ac.uk}.

My brother Mujahideen in the path of God! What can I say to you? I say to you: our wombs have been filled with the children of fornication by those sons of apes and pigs who raped us. Or I could tell you that they have defaced our bodies, spit in our faces, and tore up the little copies of the Qur'an that hung around our necks? . . . By God, we have not passed one night since we have been in prison without one of the apes and pigs jumping down upon us to rip our bodies apart with his overweening lust. And we are the ones who had guarded our virginity out of fear of God. Fear God! Kill us along with them! Destroy us along with them! Don't leave us here to let them get pleasure from raping us! It will be an act to ennoble the Throne of Almighty God. Fear God regarding us! Leave their tanks and aircraft outside. Come at us here in the prison of Abu Ghurayb. I am your sister in God (Fatimah). They raped me on one day more than nine times. Can you comprehend? Imagine one of your sisters being raped. Why can't you all imagine it, as I am your sister. With me are 13 girls, all unmarried. All have been raped before the eyes and ears of everyone. They won't let us pray. They took our clothes and won't let us get dressed. As I

\* Thanks to the journal's anonymous referees for comments on this essay and to Andrew Hoskins and James Gow for discussion about its themes.

write this letter one of the girls has committed suicide. She was savagely raped. A soldier hit her on her chest and thigh after raping her. He subjected her to unbelievable torture. She beat her head against the wall of the cell until she died, for she couldn't take any more, even though suicide is forbidden in Islam. But I excuse that girl. I have hope that God will forgive her, because He is the Most Merciful of all. Brothers, I tell you again, fear God! Kill us with them so that we might be at peace. Help! Help! Help!

In December 2004 several jihadist websites reported that a letter from 'Fatima', a prisoner in Abu Ghraib, had sparked an insurgency attack on the prison<sup>1</sup>. Said to have been written in her own blood and smuggled out of the prison, what became known as Fatima's letter tells of the repeated rape suffered by its author, alongside 13 other girls. The US State Department continues to deny the validity of the letter,<sup>2</sup> but the US military's own official investigation of the Abu Ghraib scandal, the *Taguba Report*,<sup>3</sup> admits to multiple abuses including rape. Rape at Abu Ghraib has been documented by others,<sup>4</sup> and evidence withheld from the public has been presented to members of the US Congress.<sup>5</sup>

For something as viscerally material as a *letter* – written in blood – to both spark vigorous debate among online communities and trigger an attack by insurgents on a Coalition-run prison compound, seems a throwback in today's global 'media ecology'.<sup>6</sup> 'Fatima' calls on readers to imagine, and provides no photographs or video stills.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the authenticity of the letter (and its rhetorical sophistication may raise suspicions), this communication raises several questions. Under what conditions are such messages disseminated and trusted? Why are some messages trusted and not others? But the key issue for this article is: how could a letter have effects when surely it is *images* that have most impact on audiences?

The belief that images have become the critical 'weapon' in contemporary warfare is beginning to enjoy great currency. While security policymakers have long sought to control public perceptions of warfare through media management techniques, anxieties have increased due to the emergence of a new media ecology characterised by the instant dissemination of media content produced and consumed by citizens, insurgents and terrorists as well as news organisations. This

<sup>1</sup> Akil N. Awan, 'Virtual Jihadist media: Function, legitimacy, and radicalising efficacy', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10:3 (2007), pp. 389–408; Indymedia, 'Fatima's letter and the subsequent assault on Abu Ghraib' (4 December 2004), {<http://www.indymedia.org/en/2004/12/866081.shtml>}.

<sup>2</sup> After it was originally posted on Free Arab Voice (First posted on: {<http://www.freearabvoice.org/Iraq/Report/report148.htm>} – now unavailable) it was allegedly translated from Arabic into English by Mohammad Abu Nasr. The credibility of Nasr was doubted by the US State Dept (USINFO, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Maj. Gen. Antonio M. Taguba, *The 'Taguba Report' On Treatment Of Abu Ghraib Prisoners In Iraq*, Article 15–6 Investigation of the 800th Military Police Brigade, (2004), {<http://news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/iraq/tagubarpt.html>}.

<sup>4</sup> BBC News, 'Details of US 'abuse' memos' (21 December 2004), {<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4114455.stm>}; Mark Danner, *Torture and Truth: America, Abu Ghraib, and the War on Terror* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2004); George R. Fay and Anthony R. Jones, *Investigation of the Abu Ghraib Prison/Detention Facility and 205th Military Brigade*, Department of Defense (2004), {<http://www4.army.mil/ocpa/reports/ar15-6/AR15-6.pdf>}.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Babbington, 'Lawmakers Are Stunned By New Images of Abuse', *Washington Post* (13 May 2004), pA01, {<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A22464-2004May12.html>}.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Cottle, *Mediatized Conflict: Developments in Media and Conflict Studies* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2006), pp. 51–2.

<sup>7</sup> Though the letter did inspire others to produce images representing 'Fatima', for example, 'Fatima: The virgin of Abu Ghraib', at: {<http://analogizing.blogspot.com/2005/07/fatima-virgin-of-abu-ghraib.html>}.

increases policymakers' anxieties about 'stray',<sup>8</sup> 'off-message' images 'escaping' from the field of war; what Tumber and Webster call 'seepage'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the geographically-dispersed 'War on Terror' creates a condition of 'diffused war' in which there may be no identifiable 'field' to control.<sup>10</sup> Controversy has surrounded high profile stories in which the image features heavily: Abu Ghraib and other incidents of military abuse of prisoners and civilians, the Danish cartoon dispute, and every attempt by terrorists to use media to communicate to target populations, such as videos of hostages, sniper attacks (the mysterious 'Juba' for instance)<sup>11</sup> or visually spectacular terror attacks. Bauman writes, "'Seeing is believing" means that "I'll believe it when I see it", but it also means that "what I see, I'll believe"'.<sup>12</sup> Writing on war and media in this context, Michalski and Gow argue, 'The thing that is going to cut through everything else is going to be the one that has an instant impact on the retinal – the retinal flash'.<sup>13</sup> An image 'cuts through' a person's preconceived beliefs about an event, forcing them to reconsider. To manage the possibility of images challenging legitimacy for Western militaries' actions, for instance the emergence of images of military abuse of civilians, Michalski and Gow suggest these militaries must engage more effectively and creatively in 'image environment domination, containment and suppression'.<sup>14</sup> Such practices may be challenging for several reasons, not least because Western military restrictions on journalist activity are problematic; the exclusion of reporters from Najaf, Iraq in 2004, appeared to contradict liberal democratic principles, for instance.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, an image could be 'placed' in media, strategically using images as 'weapons' to achieve particular effects in terms of disrupting enemies' narratives.<sup>16</sup> Yet this too is problematic: already-sceptical news audiences and publics around the world are alive to the politics of (mis)representation, propaganda and recent 'public diplomacy' efforts by the US, UK and others.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, scrutiny is needed of the assumptions about processes of mediation that underlie these debates.

<sup>8</sup> Marie Gillespie, *Shifting Securities: News Cultures Before and Beyond the Iraq Crisis 2003: Full Research Report*, ESRC End of Award Report, RES-223-25-0063 (Swindon: ESRC, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Howard Tumber and Frank Webster, *Journalists Under Fire: Information War and Journalistic Practices* (London: Sage, 2006), p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin, *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

<sup>11</sup> 'Juba' is a presence posting videos on jihadist websites of assassination-style killings 'he' claims to have carried out, but who may be many people. See Audrey K. Cronin, 'Cyber-Mobilization: The New *Levée en Masse*', *Parameters* (Summer 2006), pp. 77–87; David Wright, 'Baghdad Sniper: Myth or Menace?', *ABC News* (10 February 2006), {<http://www.abcnews.go.com/WNT/story?id=1604797>}.

<sup>12</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> Milena Michalski and James Gow, *War, Image, Legitimacy: Viewing Contemporary Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 205–18. Such an approach is deemed impossible by Brian McNair, who celebrates the unpredictability of meanings a story can generate. For McNair this 'chaos' is a democratic force, disrupting authorities' capacity to control communication. See Brian McNair, *Cultural Chaos: Journalism, News and Power in a Globalised World* (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Tumber and Webster, *Journalists Under Fire*.

<sup>16</sup> Marvin Kalb and Carol Saivetz, 'The Israeli-Hezbollah War of 2006: The Media as a Weapon in Asymmetrical Conflict', *Press/Politics*, 12:3 (2007), pp. 43–66; Angus Taverner, 'Dimensions of Perception: Shaping the British Approach to Information Strategy During Military Operations', in Sarah Maltby and Richard Keeble (eds), *Communicating War: Memory, Media and Military* (Bury St. Edmonds: Arima, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Helena K. Finn, 'The Case for Cultural Diplomacy', *Foreign Affairs*, 82:6 (2003), pp. 15–20; David Hoffman, 'Beyond Public Diplomacy', *Foreign Affairs*, 81:2 (2002), pp. 83–95; Karen P. Hughes,

This article seeks therefore to complicate the notion of 'images as weapons' in two ways. First, *images cannot necessarily be considered as primary*. Many news stories that have recently generated great public debate or even outrage have not included a photographic or other visual representation of the controversial phenomenon in question. The *very notion* that US interrogators had flushed copies of the Koran down toilets at Guantanamo Bay in May 2005 was sufficient to spark riots and killings in Afghanistan.<sup>18</sup> No images were necessary. This leads to the second argument of the article. Those seeking to manage and control media content related to war must take into account that it is not the immediate impact of media content that shocks, but *what that content represents*. The data this article draws upon suggests that news content generates the most intense responses when audiences feel a story signifies something more profound. Another brief example: it was not audiences' squeamishness at witnessing images of US soldiers being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu in 1993 that mattered, but that audiences might feel these images signified unnecessary deaths, mistaken foreign policy or incompetent leadership. The images forced some audience members to reconsider their understanding of the intervention and, henceforth, the level of casualties they would tolerate.<sup>19</sup> Hence, predicting the 'impact' of media content requires attention to the more complex relation between specific images and the underlying beliefs, narratives and ideologies held to by particular audiences.

This point has recently been made in the pages of this journal by Cynthia Weber<sup>20</sup>, who points to the need for scholars of international politics to account for what she calls its 'visual language'. The conceptual challenge this poses is suggested by the visual culture scholar W. J. T. Mitchell in an essay, 'There Are No Visual Media'.<sup>21</sup> He argues that all media are *mixed*: for a painting to have any meaning, its visuality must be read via 'critical discourse[s]', otherwise it is 'nothing but wallpaper', in Jackson Pollock's words. Any interpretation entails drawing on language. He adds that the interpretation of (visual) media is 'embedded in practice, experience, tradition and technical inventions', such that the way viewers-cum-audiences make sense of images depends on what they happen to be doing, their prior cultural, religious, social and other beliefs and knowledges, and the significance of the technical medium itself (television, the Internet, a magazine, and so on).

These arguments are demonstrated in the following way. The first section of the article explores why images of suffering do not automatically create sympathy for victims. Military and government policymakers' fears that graphic images will turn publics against war are simplistic. It matters who the casualties are, and overlooks audiences' awareness of how such images become public, for many audiences

"'Waging Peace': A New Paradigm for Public Diplomacy', *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 18:2 (2007), pp. 18–36; Liam Kennedy, 'Remembering September 11: photography as cultural diplomacy', *International Affairs*, 79:2 (2003), pp. 315–26; Rhiannon Vickers, 'The New Public Diplomacy in Britain and Canada', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 6:2 (2004), pp. 182–94.

<sup>18</sup> BBC News, 'Nine killed as Afghans rage at US' (13 May 2005), {[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/4544833.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4544833.stm)}; Philip Seib, *The Al Jazeera Affect: How the New Global Media are Reshaping World Politics* (Washington, DC.: Potomac Books, 2009), p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> Richard C. Eichenberg, 'Victory has Many Friends: US Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force, 1981–2005', *International Security*, 30:1 (2005), pp. 7–45.

<sup>20</sup> Cynthia Weber, 'Popular visual language as global communication: the remediation of United Airlines Flight 93', *Review of International Studies*, 34: S1 (2008), pp. 137–53.

<sup>21</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, 'There Are No Visual Media', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4:2 (2005), pp. 257–66.

approach such stories with a questioning stance, exhibiting more media literacy than policymakers anticipate.<sup>22</sup> In the second section it is proposed that it is the referent or signified that triggers audiences' objections, not the image *per se*. Images of bodies only cause upset if they signify a greater failure.<sup>23</sup> The third section of the article suggests how audiences may be reflexive about the process of mediation itself rather than the content of images or what is signified, for instance reflecting on what is appropriate to broadcast rather than the meaning of what is broadcast. Additionally, audiences may follow certain 'channels' of interpretation, falling into grooves or avenues of denunciation, sentiment or relating to a spectacle as an aesthetic experience.<sup>24</sup> Finally, it is asked in section four under what conditions *could* an image 'cut through' prior beliefs and narratives and 'stick'. It is suggested that personalisation may be a fertile condition for this to happen: media stories convey a news event through its effects on a particular person, which audiences can relate to. Drawing on Chouliaraki's<sup>25</sup> study of spectatorship, the section contains a brief exploration of factors contributing to such connections, how media can position audiences to encourage connections, and the importance of the social situation of an individual's media consumption in determining the likelihood of images disrupting beliefs and narratives.

To illustrate these arguments, the article draws upon data and analysis from a recent study, *Shifting Securities*, which explored how the interaction of news producers and journalists, news content, and audiences, in the period following the 2003 Iraq war led to a particular security culture in the UK. Through a new model of multidisciplinary research that integrated audience ethnography, textual analysis of television and Internet news, and interviews with government, military and media elites,<sup>26</sup> researchers examined the production of frames and discourses of security and conflict, the differing perceptions of security held by different social groups, and how these frames and perceptions shifted over several years in light of critical security events. Research findings have so far centred upon multiculturalism, ethnicity and security,<sup>27</sup> government and military legitimacy,<sup>28</sup> the relation

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham, *Media consumption and public engagement: beyond the presumption of attention* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> See for example Martin Shaw, *The New Western Way of War: Risk-Transfer War and its Crisis in Iraq* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), p. 139.

<sup>24</sup> Luc Boltanski, (Translated by Graham Burchell), *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Lillie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: Sage, 2006).

<sup>26</sup> Research by the Glasgow University Media Group (GUMG) in the 1980s and 1990s also sought to analyse audiences, texts and producers, including in the study of war and conflict; see for example GUMG, *War and Peace News* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985). However, where the GUMG analysed single issues in short time periods, *Shifting Securities* was an iterative, flexible three-year study in which emerging hypotheses and findings from one methodological strand fed into the others, and hypotheses were tested across a number of events and issues.

<sup>27</sup> Marie Gillespie, (Guest editor) 'After September 11 2001: Television News and Transnational Audiences', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32:6 (2006), pp. 923–46; Marie Gillespie, (Guest editor) 'Media, Security and Multicultural Citizenship' Special Issue, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10:3 (2007), pp. 275–93; Marie Gillespie, James Gow, Andrew Hoskins, Ben O'Loughlin, and Ivan Žveržhanovski, 'Shifting Securities: News Cultures, Multicultural Society and Legitimacy', *Ethnopolitics*, 9:2 (2010), pp. 239–53; Marie Gillespie, James Gow, Andrew Hoskins, Ben O'Loughlin, and Ivan Žveržhanovski, 'Shifting Securities: Theory, Practice and Methodology: A Response to Powers, Croft and Noble', *Ethnopolitics*, 9:2 (2010), pp. 269–74.

<sup>28</sup> Gillespie, *Shifting Securities*; Michalski and Gow, *War, Image and Legitimacy*.

between media and terror,<sup>29</sup> public understandings of security threats,<sup>30</sup> and democracy and insecurity.<sup>31</sup> In this article, data is drawn upon from the multilingual, multiethnic audience ethnography (see appendix) and interviews with military policymakers to shed light on the processes through which audiences interpret images of war and conflict, in particular scenes from Abu Ghraib and Fallujah.<sup>32</sup> The research was facilitated by support at the Royal College for Defence Studies, the Joint Services Command and Staff College and the BBC. The focus groups involved journalists, military, officials, transitional justice practitioners and security specialists – initially in mixed, exploratory groups, then in discrete groups.<sup>33</sup> This data is not representative in a statistical sense, but is used instead to indicate the interpretive work done by audiences (and policymakers). Moreover, given the difficulty of generating reliable qualitative data regarding Muslim and ‘racialised’ minorities in the UK since the 2003 Iraq war,<sup>34</sup> and the absence of such data from scholarly debates in international relations,<sup>35</sup> it is hoped the reader will feel the data a valuable basis for discussion.

### **Audience interpretations of Abu Ghraib photos**

In the following quote, Raphael, a 24 year-old Turkish speaking Briton born in Israel, makes the case for images as powerful, as having effects:

Raphael: I think for Abu Ghraib . . . no other medium other than the image has more power. Image is the strongest thing for a human being to be captivated by. I think showing of images is an important factor in news casts. [. . .] Because when you see an image like this you immediately think the person that did this is in the wrong. Immediately. So when you see an image *you are immediately on the side of those suffering*, that's why it's important to show the both sides because the image is so powerful.<sup>36</sup>

This summarises why military authorities might be wary of ‘stray’ images from warzones. Raphael suggests that viewers will automatically side with those represented as suffering, hence if US or UK military action results in suffering,

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin, *Television and Terror: Conflicting Times and the Crisis of News Discourse* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009); Hoskins and O'Loughlin, *War and Media*.

<sup>30</sup> Marie Gillespie and Ben O'Loughlin, ‘News Media, Threats and Insecurities: an Ethnographic Approach’, *Cambridge Review of International Studies*, 22:4 (2009), pp. 667–85.

<sup>31</sup> Giles Moss and Ben O'Loughlin, ‘Convincing Claims: Representation and Democracy in Post-9/11 Britain’, *Political Studies*, 56:3 (2008), pp. 705–24.

<sup>32</sup> The *Shifting Securities* project was funded by the ESRC as part of the New Security Challenges research programme (Award Ref RES-223-25-0063). Between October 2004 and March 2007 fourteen ethnographers spoke to 239 individuals across the UK, interviewing the same groups and families on several occasions to trace shifting perceptions of security, legitimacy and identity over time. The researchers were: Ammar Al Ghabban, Habiba Noor, Awa Hassan Ahmed, Atif Imtiaz, Akil Awan, Nouredine Miladi, Karen Qureshi, Zahbia Yousuf, David Herbert, Sadaf Rivzi, Somnath Batabyal, Awa Al Hassan, Olivia Allison and Marie Gillespie. In the same period James Gow and Ivan Žveržhanovski conducted 19 focus groups and 21 semi-structured interviews with news editors, journalists, government and military policymakers, and security ‘experts’. Full project details can be found at: {[www.mediatingsecurity.com](http://www.mediatingsecurity.com)}.

<sup>33</sup> For confidentiality reasons it is not possible to identify their roles in any more detail.

<sup>34</sup> Moss and O'Loughlin, ‘Convincing Claims’.

<sup>35</sup> Gillespie, *Shifting Securities*.

<sup>36</sup> *Shifting Securities*, Strand A, Focus Group Z2.1, lines 290–97.

which is then broadcast, then viewers will side against that US or UK military action. Robert Fisk, the war correspondent of *The Independent*, follows this logic in criticising journalists for not showing sufficient death and injury:

I've believed for many years now that journalism – in particular television journalism – by its failure to show the real horror of war, has become a lethal weapon, supporting governments that want to go to war.<sup>37</sup>

Fisk appears to assume that audiences would sympathise with those suffering 'the real horror' and refuse to support a government whose military interventions bring that horror about. Yet Sontag<sup>38</sup> makes a simple objection: 'To those who are sure that right is on one side, oppression and injustice on the other, and that the fighting must go on, what matters is precisely who is killed and by whom'. Political loyalties and attachments can colour our interpretation of images of suffering. The pain of others can signify your safety and success.<sup>39</sup> This is both a matter of social groupings and loyalties, and a historical question. In contemporary studies of media and morality, arguments that audiences systematically feel compassion towards representations of suffering remain hypotheses rather than verifiable facts, and more complex than many policymakers or journalists<sup>40</sup> acknowledge.<sup>41</sup>

A related fear expressed by military authorities is that news media disseminate such images knowing this will harm the credibility of military actions and even put military personnel at risk. Indeed, violent resistance to coalition forces in Iraq followed the publication of the Abu Ghraib photos. In one focus group with military practitioners, in which participants were asked to respond to still or moving footage, one practitioner connected the death of colleagues to fake pictures published on 1 May 2004 by a British tabloid newspaper, *The Mirror*, of British troops abusing Iraqi detainees: 'Casualties in Iraq were directly attributable to those false *Mirror* pictures'.<sup>42</sup> Certainly it may be that some Iraqis were moved to violence by the pictures. However, when asked about Western audiences, the military practitioners assumed audiences understood stories entirely through the image, thus missing the context and complexity of the original incident. A gulf in understanding between civilians and military was assumed:

Images make it simplistic because they offer no context. There is no 'lesser of two evils' [that is, no shades of grey] . . . The military are from Mars, civilians are from Venus. They only have war films to prepare them.<sup>43</sup>

Another said:

Most people don't understand. There are significant challenges in explaining things to the public. An incident can be full of complex uncertainties that couldn't be seen. It's like talking to a brick wall.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Robert Fisk, quoted in 'Iraq: The Hidden Story', *Dispatches*, Channel 4, 29 May 2006.

<sup>38</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

<sup>39</sup> See Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, pp.10–11 on vengeance and the satisfaction some viewing of suffering can elicit.

<sup>40</sup> Martin Bell, *In Harm's Way* (New York: Penguin, 1996, Revised Edition).

<sup>41</sup> Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*; Keith Tester, *Compassion, Morality and the Media* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001); Chouliaraki, *Spectatorship*.

<sup>42</sup> Shifting Securities, Strand C, Focus Group 11, paragraph 14.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 19.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, paragraph 18.

In fact, audiences may be well aware of such uncertainties. The *Shifting Securities* study indicates that audiences are aware of the dynamics of how and why media come to publish such images and stories, and given this awareness, this surely should alleviate some of the fears of the military authorities. One interviewer arranged five focus groups in which audiences were asked to watch news footage of a recent event, thus replicating the format of the military practitioners.<sup>45</sup> In the following quote three women in their twenties working in London discuss media treatment of the Abu Ghraib photographs. Gwen is French and works for an arts charity, Dominique is German and an architect, and Julia, British, is an administrative assistant. Gwen and Dominique are religious, catholic and protestant respectively:

Interviewer: And do you think it was right for the media to show these pictures?

Gwen: I think they were right to

Dominique: Yeah I think so too, to show about torture and how far people go nowadays. And to shock people. . .

Gwen: I think especially as America has taken on this role as the beacon of human rights, spreading the rule of law and being this fair country, a democracy, the American ideals, so for America to be engaged in torture abroad I think it was right to show it.

Julia: I don't know actually whether it was right. I think they [the media] were trying to shock people.

Gwen: Do you not think they got a response though?

Julia: Yeah they did. But that's not right, that just by shocking people that something is done about it. It should have been enough that it had happened, that people knew it had happened. Like why was that on the front page of the paper, why was it showing all these things? Because we had a need to know, or because it was voyeurism?<sup>46</sup>

There are a number of tensions in this discussion. Initially, Dominique expresses approval of the notion of shocking audiences, to demonstrate to them 'how far people go nowadays' practicing torture. Gwen then raises an apparent contradiction that these images somehow encapsulate between America as self-appointed 'beacon of human rights' and American practices of torture. Such a contradiction and its implications of hypocrisy is certainly a familiar component of critiques of US foreign policy. But Julia interjects, questioning media publication of the images and the motive of shocking audiences. Gwen justifies that motive in terms of an apparent media effect: 'they got a response'; in other words, because media showed these images the US administration and military were forced to account for what was represented and hold personnel accountable for the actions represented in the images. However, Julia argues that it should not take media shock tactics to generate such a response, and that to treat images in this way leads to the possibility of voyeurism. Rather than being a 'brick wall', then, the women share and negotiate interpretations of the fact of the mediation of the photos itself and their expectations of the effects of that mediation.

The three women appeared to agree that publication of the images did have an effect, inasmuch as personnel were held to account. Gwen said, 'Americans read in the papers soldiers in Iraq torturing Iraqis, with no images, are they going to believe it?' Julia added, 'if there is no photographic evidence they won't do anything about it'. The notion of photography as constituting evidence is worth

<sup>45</sup> *Shifting Securities*, Strand A, Focus Groups Z2.1, Z2.2, Z2.3, Z2.4 and Z2.5.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, Strand A, Focus Group Z2.2, lines 33–45.

scrutinising. ‘Something becomes real [. . .] by being photographed’, Sontag writes, since ‘an image produced with a camera is, literally, a trace of something brought before the lens’.<sup>47</sup> In an age of digital photography this is not always so; witness the sacking by Reuters of journalist Adnan Hajj for doctoring photographs of an Israeli air strike on Beirut in 2006 using digital editing equipment. In fact the evidentiary status of photographs is complex. They offer the authenticity of co-presence, of being there; the objectivity of a transparent copy, or trace, of the thing photographed; it doesn’t matter who took the photograph, it is still a direct copy of what is there – hence the mobile phone footage of citizen journalists has credibility (perhaps more credibility for being slightly amateurish). Yet the photograph is always taken from a perspective and, if a photograph is of *this*, then there must be a *that* that is missing. Photographs can be understood as having a function or purpose; they are not detached from political action, as Nicholas Mirzoeff has documented.<sup>48</sup> Later in the focus group the three women identify some of these problems with photos as evidence. They are still talking about the Abu Ghraib images:

Julia: I think also things can get a bit twisted. You never really know the whole story

Gwen: That’s the thing with any news

Julia: I know that. But the point is that you can show an image of something and then everyone suddenly knows everything about it whereas you don’t. You don’t read the story, you just see the images, and case closed.

Dominique: In this case you don’t need to know the story behind it

Julia: But you do, you need to know who’s doing what, you need to know why people are doing these things. You do need to know the story.<sup>49</sup>

It appears the women contradict themselves. Earlier, images were deemed necessary ‘evidence’. Now images are insufficient for knowing ‘the whole story’. Dominique may suggest that for Abu Ghraib ‘you don’t need to know the story behind it’, as if the pictures speak for themselves. But Julia maintains that this is not the whole story, ‘you need to know why people are doing these things’. What is at stake here is the relation between the representation and what is represented. Dominique seems to accept that a representation is a sufficient basis for knowledge of the case represented, holding to an correspondence between event and its representation, as if the photo fully describes the event.<sup>50</sup> Julia does not trust the very process of representation. Why should they differ in their responses?

This is a very important point. As we have seen, it is not just that audiences have differing interpretations of the same images, but that they are aware of a possible plurality of interpretations, they are aware that theirs is one of several possible views, and that reflecting on this plurality is part of their interpretation or diagnosis of the images they are presented with – asking why different actors are

<sup>47</sup> Sontag, *Regarding*, pp. 19, 21.

<sup>48</sup> Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *Watching Babylon: The Iraq War and Global Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). See also Keith Moxley, ‘Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 7:2 (2008), pp. 131–46.

<sup>49</sup> Shifting Securities, Strand A, Focus Group Z2.2, lines 91–8.

<sup>50</sup> Chouliaraki, *Spectatorship*, pp. 79–81. Additionally, the role of captions is therefore overlooked here. Yet whatever the medium through which Dominique viewed the Abu Ghraib photographs, the photographs would have been accompanied by a caption or voiceover – all media have multimodal properties.

attempting to frame the same event in different ways. Factors that may explain the differing responses of Julia and Dominique include media literacy and, again, political beliefs. For instance, it may be that Dominique is simply 'anti-American' and willing to believe the worst, immediately, while Julia has a more ambivalent stance to the US or the Iraq war.

Hence whether, when, how and why images have particular meanings to audiences, eliciting sympathy for casualties and antipathy to war, for instance, depends on a relation between the representation of a story and audiences' longer term political beliefs, and, furthermore, how that relation adheres will depend on certain literacies on the part of audiences. To address the contention that images can be used as 'weapons', we therefore need a fuller account of such processes of mediation. This is the first point of the article.

### Looking past the image

For authorities seeking to restrict the dissemination of images, it is not fear of the impact of pictures of dead bodies – a visceral shock – but fear of the impact of what those dead bodies might *signify or represent*: unnecessary failure, a bad choice, poor strategy or tactics, a young life wasted, the promise of further deaths, and so on. The 'CNN effect' literature is instructive here. The CNN effect was a hypothesis emerging in the 1990s testing the proposition that visually compelling news footage of suffering in a distant country will stir Western audiences and policymakers to act to alleviate the suffering, through humanitarian or military intervention.<sup>51</sup> The thesis emerged when blanket coverage by CNN and other 24-hour news services seemed to cause effects on geopolitical events such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, the 1991 Gulf War, and US military interventions in Somalia and the Balkans. The constant, live coverage from anywhere in the world was considered to constitute a new pressure on foreign policymakers, intensifying and speeding up the decision-making process. The validity of the thesis is questionable,<sup>52</sup> in many instances in which it appeared media coverage pressured policymakers into acting, it turned out policymakers were already acting, but media had chosen not to cover those policies. Shattuck claimed 'The media got us

<sup>51</sup> For an overview of the journalists, scholars and policymakers who advanced the CNN effect thesis from the early 1990s onwards, see Eytan Gilboa, 'Global Television News and Foreign Policy: Debating the CNN Effect', *International Studies Perspectives*, 6 (2005), pp. 325–34. The few studies to demonstrate observable effects of specific types of media coverage on specific types of policy decision are Piers Robinson, *The CNN Effect: The Myth of News, Foreign Policy and Intervention* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002); and Steven Livingston, 'Clarifying the CNN Effect: An Examination of Media Effects According to Type of Military Intervention', Joan Shorenstein Center, Harvard University, Research Paper R-18 (1997).

<sup>52</sup> Nik Gowing, *Real-time television coverage of armed conflicts and diplomatic crises: Does it pressure or distort foreign policy decisions?* (Cambridge, MA.: The Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University, 1994); 'Global Television News'; Hoskins and O'Loughlin, *Television and Terror*, pp. 53–73; Michalski and Gow, *War, Image and Legitimacy*, pp. 128–9; W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence and Steven Livingston, *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), pp. 219–20, fn. 31); Derek B. Miller, *Media Pressure on Foreign Policy: The Evolving Theoretical Framework* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008), pp. 10–7.

[the US] into Somalia and then got us out'<sup>53</sup> because of 'pictures of starving people'.<sup>54</sup> In fact, the first Bush administration intervened in Somalia in 1992 in response to civil war, mass starvation, control of strategically important sea lanes off the Somali coast,<sup>55</sup> and the possibility of a quick victory;<sup>56</sup> only later in 1992 when one part of the administration tried to persuade another part that greater intervention was required, and ultimately over 25,000 troops were committed, did US media pay attention.<sup>57</sup> Following the subsequent Battle of Mogadishu in October 1993 when 18 US troops were killed and footage broadcast of two being dragged through the streets, several prominent journalists and policymakers blamed the US media for getting the US military involved.<sup>58</sup> For some, these images signified the unnecessary deaths of American soldiers insofar as US political leaders had failed to explain the rationale of the intervention, which appeared to shift from a humanitarian rationale to peacemaking.<sup>59</sup> The fear of 'another Mogadishu' – of a 'tragedy' of lives lost without enhancing the national interest – meant preventing such images (and thereby constraining policy) because of a fear of what more images would represent. Richard Holbrooke labelled this 'Vietmalia' syndrome, mixing Vietnam and Somalia.<sup>60</sup> The US public did not necessarily feel casualty aversion *per se*; rather, one dimension of the CNN effect appeared to be that media publication of images signifying another unnecessary or ill-conceived intervention acted thereafter as a constraint on foreign policy.<sup>61</sup>

The significance of images of casualties and suffering is not intrinsic and given, but depends on audiences' interpretation of what they signify. Sontag writes, 'The Spanish Civil War in the second half of the 1930s, the Serb and Croat wars against Bosnia in the mid-1990s, the drastic worsening of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that began in 2000 – these contests were guaranteed the attention of many cameras because *they were invested with the meaning of larger struggles*'.<sup>62</sup> The Spanish Civil War signified a stand against the fascist menace; the Bosnian war signified, for Sontag, a multicultural underdog nation resisting a dominant regional power; and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict resonating on numerous historical and political levels. Other wars have received less attention because they have less resonance beyond those involved. The point recurs, then: Our society is not averse to death, or even to unnecessary death. A recent RAND study indicates US citizens have 'more realistic expectations' about the likelihood of civilian casualties in war than

<sup>53</sup> Bernard C. Cohen, 'The view from the academy', in W. Lance Bennett and David Paletz (eds), *Taken by storm: The media, public opinion, and US foreign policy in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 174.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, 'The reluctance to intervene', *Foreign Policy*, vol. 95, p. 16.

<sup>55</sup> Peter Lehr, *Violence at Sea: Piracy in the Age of Global Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 12–3.

<sup>56</sup> Timothy M. Karcher, *Understanding the 'Victory Disease', From the Little Bighorn, To Mogadishu, to the Future* (2003, Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army Command and General Staff College, School of Advanced Military Studies).

<sup>57</sup> Livingston, 'Clarifying the CNN Effect'; Piers Robinson, 'Operation Restore Hope and the Illusion of a News Media Driven Intervention', *Political Studies*, 49 (2001), pp. 941–56.

<sup>58</sup> Gilboa, 'Global Television News'.

<sup>59</sup> Livingston, 'Clarifying the CNN Effect'.

<sup>60</sup> David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton and the Generals* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), p. 265.

<sup>61</sup> On the 'bodybag effect' see also Lawrence Freedman, 'Victims and victors: reflections on the Kosovo War', *Review of International Studies*, 26:3 (2000) pp. 335–58.

<sup>62</sup> Sontag, *Regarding*, pp. 32–3. Emphasis added.

media and policymakers predict.<sup>63</sup> We live with 1,000s of road casualties, and deaths from drinking and smoking. The aversion appears to be generated by unnecessary death in conjunction with other factors. Take the intense reaction to terrorist attacks or to the death of young children. Is this simply disproportionate? Or do these deaths signify something extra, for instance a society's loss of control, the notion that there are people out there with bad intentions – the possibility and presence of 'evil', perhaps.<sup>64</sup> When the Challenger space shuttle blew up in 1986 only seven people died yet the event appeared a severe cultural shock, perhaps because it signified new doubts about technological progress, central to the self-image of US society.<sup>65</sup> Hence policymakers and news managers must always consider the relation between image and narrative; between a verbal or visual sound bite and the context of meaning within which it appears for audiences.

In the *Shifting Securities* research, the presentation of a television news report that included images of a house/building-clearing operation in Fallujah in which a US marine shot dead an unarmed and apparently injured Iraqi civilian in a mosque (filmed by NBC journalist Kevin Sites on 13 November 2004)<sup>66</sup> which drew sharp concern from a focus group of security policymakers. In the report, a marine can be heard to say that the Iraqi was 'playing dead', before firing on him, and declaring he was 'dead now'. The policymakers thought the news report lacked context, for instance not describing the rules of engagement for such incidents, and they assumed audiences would take a negative view of such Coalition activities in Iraq.<sup>67</sup> Yet when shown to audiences, the report elicited a range of responses, and none accused the US marine of murder.<sup>68</sup> After discussing the footage for 30 minutes or so, Zain, an NGO worker in London, said: 'But for me the underlying issue is accountability [...] without accountability this sort of thing will keep on happening'. Apart from the spatial metaphor (underlying, that is, hidden, latent, submerged, but foundational), the meaning of the moving images, for Zain, is not just about what is seen, but what they signify: to him, a larger problem of US soldiers' mistreatment of Iraqi civilians without any unaccountability.

Luke, a 22 year old student and Muslim convert living in Edinburgh, was asked about media coverage of the capture of Saddam Hussein by US forces in May 2005. Photographs appeared in international media of Hussein being examined by medical officers. The interviewer asked Luke about a particular photo of 'Saddam in his underpants' published in *The Sun* newspaper.<sup>69</sup>

Luke: Well it's blatantly controversial (laugh) I mean it's to grab people's attention eh eh it's just controversial, it's just. Maybe – is it controversial – I don't know. It's confusing.

Interviewer: Do you think those kind of pictures would have a different affect on other people?

<sup>63</sup> Eric V. Larson and Bogdan Savych, *Misfortunes of War: Press and Public Reactions to Civilian Deaths in Wartime* (Santa Monica, CA.: RAND Corporation, 2007).

<sup>64</sup> Roger Silverstone, *Media and Morality* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), pp. 56–79.

<sup>65</sup> Bill Durodie, 'Fear and Terror in a Post-Political Age', *Government and Opposition*, 42:3 (2007), pp. 427–50.

<sup>66</sup> MSNBC.com 'US probes shooting at Fallujah mosque' (16 November 2004), {<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6496898/>}.

<sup>67</sup> *Shifting Securities*, Strand C, Focus Group 11, para. 19.

<sup>68</sup> Marie Gillespie, James Gow, Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin, 'Shifting Securities: News Cultures, Multicultural Society and Legitimacy', *Ethnopolitics* (2009).

<sup>69</sup> On 20 May 2005 the *New York Post* in the US and *The Sun* in the UK published photos of Saddam Hussein in underwear.

Luke: I don't think it's the images. I think it's the story is more important than the images. That Saddam Hussein has been captured is more important than the fact that you see Saddam Hussein getting checked for lice or Saddam Hussein in his underpants. That he's been captured by the Americans is more significant. As images yeah I don't think the images are that important. It's the stories that are more important.<sup>70</sup>

Luke emphasises that one incident or image is less significant than the broad political strategy that it forms a part of. The interviewer asks for his response to a copy of the faked pictures of UK troops abusing Iraqi detainees, mentioned earlier:

Interviewer: And what did you think when you saw that?

Luke: Em real, real anger I guess. But I mean I think these were fake, these pictures – were they? 'Cause – was it not the British Army's abuse of prisoners – this isn't Abu Ghraib is it – oh it's in near Basra. Yeah it makes me feel angry, those images made me feel really angry. I can remember feeling that, 'cause I was in the Middle East at the time (Interviewer: where were you at the time?) in Egypt and there – Syria sorry Syria . . . and I remember thinking they're making a big fuss about it, why are they making a big fuss about it, but at the same time I felt very angry about the images. But I guess, again it's just like a symptom of a much bigger issue I guess that's kind of making the news

Interviewer: What was it you felt that you didn't know what they were making such a big fuss of?

Luke: . . . I guess it was because em it was a symptom of a much bigger problem i.e. America and British imperialism in the Middle East. Em and just disrespect basically of em of em Muslims in the Middle East and of Iraqis generally. And again that is a symptom of western imperialism in the Middle East. I think that's – in a way the images kinda reminded me of that.<sup>71</sup>

The photographs elicited anger in him because for him they signified the broader political phenomenon of 'imperialism' (though it is noticeable that he seemed unsure whether the photographs were fake or not). Asked whether images lead to radicalisation, he says it is 'people's analysis of the situation basically that will make people respond more than images I think'. His discounting of images, he explains, is also due to his own wariness that an image can only show 'one side' of a story, and that many images are selected by media simply to attract readers; newspapers showing images of Saddam in his underpants or Coalition military abuses are 'Maybe jumping on a bandwagon', Luke adds. Yet even he acknowledges some images had a particular effect on him (it is unclear which conflict he is referring to):

Luke: There's been one of a picture of a family, a family photo and there was like eh like some faces that had been circled and they were the ones that had died. And it was an extended family . . . That's an image I can really, really remember [. . .] it shows the affect of the war on like em just normal people – people I can relate to.<sup>72</sup>

Overall, the interviews with Zain and Luke illustrate how audiences may interpret images of warfare in terms of what those images might signify, not out of any response to the image itself. Moreover, Luke's consumption of news media is particularly reflexive and he consciously resists being taken in by what he perceives to be populist news agendas. However, Luke's admission that a particular image

<sup>70</sup> *Shifting Securities*, Strand A, Focus Group K11, lines 206–17.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 221–41.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, lines 493–7, 559–60.

stayed in his memory because it featured people he could relate to reminds us that it is not merely a question of image or larger narrative, but how the two are composed together.

### Reflexivity about mediation

Mitchell argued (above) that interpretation of visual media is 'embedded in practice, experience, tradition, and technical inventions', from which we can infer that the 'power' of an image to have an 'impact' on audiences depends on a particular combination of these contextual factors. The *Shifting Securities* data supports this. Analysis here will suggest that not only do underlying narratives appear to shape audience interpretations, but the very practice of news consumption involves a degree of reflexivity on audiences' part about the practice itself. As Stephen Crocker writes, 'As long as we remain focused on questions of [...] the meaning of messages, we miss our deeply tortuous relation with the fact of mediation itself'.<sup>73</sup>

It is certainly the case that certain images came to symbolise broader conflicts for interviewees during the *Shifting Securities* study. The Iraqi boy, Ali Abbas, aged 12 when he lost his arms (and family) in a Coalition missile attack in Baghdad in 2003, was mentioned several times by interviewees, both because of the shocking nature of footage of him after the attack, his apparent helplessness and need of saving, but also because these quasi-religious understandings of his plight appeared to resonate for participants with a broader political narrative of 'Iraqi civilians suffering'. In this context, several interviewees recalled images from the Gaza Strip in September 2000 of the 12 year-old Palestinian Muhammad al-Durrah, sheltering in the arms of his father as he was shot dead by Israeli forces.<sup>74</sup> Such images become icons, in the sense of 'a picture directly representing a prototype',<sup>75</sup> the prototypical suffering child. Icons acquire symbolism within a social context, becoming a stock or standard image,<sup>76</sup> and indeed the still image of al-Durrah is one that has been reproduced over and over again on posters and postage stamps.<sup>77</sup>

However, the significance of such image lies not only in what they represent, but in how they are mediated. The death of Muhammad al-Durrah was remarked upon by Zeba, a public sector professional and Sunni Muslim in Edinburgh:

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Crocker, 'Noises and Exceptions: Pure Mediality in Serres and Agamben', *CTheory* (28 March 2007), {<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=574>}.

<sup>74</sup> A series of the photographs of the incident are available at: {<http://www.guardian.co.uk/galleryguide/0,6191,377275,00.html>}.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas F. Heck, *Picturing performance: the iconography of the performing arts in concept and practice* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 1999), p. 34. Iconography is a term and approach originating in art history. See Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970) and Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology* (London: Icon, 1972).

<sup>76</sup> Andrew Hoskins, *Televising War: From Vietnam to Iraq* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), pp. 106–25.

<sup>77</sup> Gal Beckerman, 'The Unpeaceful Rest of Mohammed Al-Dura', *Columbia Journalism Review* (3 October 2007), {[http://www.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/the\\_unpeaceful\\_rest\\_of\\_mohamme.php?page=all](http://www.cjr.org/behind_the_news/the_unpeaceful_rest_of_mohamme.php?page=all)}.

Zeba: There was a thing on TV just a couple of days ago about the *Images that Shook the World* it was on ITV. It was on to celebrate the anniversary of ITV, and there was one image and I can't get it out of my head. Because they were showing all these big news scoops that ITV had shown and there was one . . . it was in em Palestine and it was this man and his wee boy – he was with his 12 year old son and the Israelis – have you seen it – and the Israelis were shooting and he was trying to protect his son and they both got shot. And I was actually, I was actually – even to see that in a top ten of – I was thinking that's being trivialised. I mean it's not being trivialised, there was lots of other deaths in there, but that image was just so upsetting. *To think* you could actually see somebody dying on the screen. I mean would they have shown – they wouldn't have shown that clip if it had been someone in London being shot. If it had been a ten year old, 12 year old English boy being shot and his dad protecting him . . . I don't think it was just being shown 'cause it was a Muslim scene, I think if it had happened in Vietnam they would have still shown it 'cause it's not seen as being so personal in that way. But that that is the one thing that will stay with me for a very long time.<sup>78</sup>

Zeba's response operates at two levels. She recounts her immediate emotional reaction, but she also reports her reaction to seeing such images. '*To think*' that mainstream television would breach standards of taste and decency she took for granted is as upsetting as what the image portrayed. In her daily routine she herself is a 'sceptical zapper',<sup>79</sup> flicking between terrestrial and satellite television every day alongside Internet and newspapers. In the quote above we see her media literacy and reflexivity instantly engaged as she suggests British television would find such footage of an 'English boy' being shot too personal for presumed British audiences, but equates this 'Muslim scene' with hypothetical coverage of the Vietnam War as sufficiently distant. Zeba's sister Haleema also saw the ITV programme and said 'Okay I can see Al Jazeera or whatever showing it' [such a graphic scene] or 'a film or a movie', but not mainstream television. This suggests how audiences contextualise news of war and conflict against different genres, so that their responses to such news – immediately and upon reflection – will be generated through their comparisons of what is acceptable across genres as well as deriving meaning from those contexts.

Audiences also interpret still or moving images in one genre (say, news) in the terms of another genre. The Fallujah footage was shown to another focus group, in which participants responded most strikingly to the moments in which, at the moment the US marine shot the Iraqi, the camera footage was replaced by a black screen but the sound track continued, such that the audience could hear the gunshot:

Uzma: You hear things but you don't actually see what is going on. Your imagination works overtime as to what is going on, what is going to happen

Ismael: In a lot of horror movies, when you actually see the creature, its like pff! [that is, no big deal] But when you haven't [seen the creature] your mind is working overtime – what could it be?<sup>80</sup>

In the quote above, Ismael refers to horror movies to make sense of his experience of viewing the Falluja news footage.<sup>81</sup> As this exchange suggests, what often seems most stimulating to audiences is the activation of their imaginations by particular

<sup>78</sup> Shifting Securities, Strand A, Focus Group K14, lines 1645–65.

<sup>79</sup> Marie Gillespie, *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change* (London: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>80</sup> Shifting Securities, Strand A, Focus Group Z2.4, lines 82–5.

<sup>81</sup> It is perhaps notable that in 142 interviews in the *Shifting Securities* study, cinema or miniseries were mentioned 14 times in this way.

mixes of present *and absent* sounds and images. If we think it is a certain type of story, we will expect it to feature certain things even if we cannot see them. But what reservoirs of stories, beliefs and information form the imaginative resources drawn on by audiences in these instances? What comes to mind?<sup>82</sup> This process has been investigated by Luc Boltanski,<sup>83</sup> who argues that we engage with news about distant suffering (wars, conflicts, catastrophes) through three emotional reactions or 'topics': *denunciation*, *sentiment*, or an *aesthetic* connection to the event. In other words we can react with indignation, tender-heartedness, or view the scene purely as a spectacle. Witnessing a scenario, the spectator's reaction or topic triggers particular imaginative resources about *that type of scenario*; for instance, if I see a news story about a battle I will expect winners and losers, a beginning and an end. Depending on my relation to the parties in the battle I may feel indignation (they are attacking my people) or sentiment (I am glad we won but I pity the casualties of the losers). With no relation to the parties, I may view it as pure spectacle. For each reaction, a set of analogous situations enters my imagination: this battle is like that movie, like that battle ten years ago, like that video game, and so on. Zeba's shock (above) that ITV would broadcast the killing of Muhammad al-Durrah in its top ten *Images that Shook the World* indicates that instead of denunciation towards the Israeli soldiers, or sympathy towards the boy and his father, Zeba's focus was the aesthetics, in particular the process by which the killing became a spectacle deemed palatable to UK mainstream television audiences.

We will be able share with others our emotional reaction and the analogous situations that come to our minds, for in any society there will be typical scenarios and narratives that are part of a shared repertoire; think how frequently the 9/11 attacks were compared to movies as people interpreted the attack together.<sup>84</sup> Hence Boltanski argues:

By describing different ways of transmitting the spectacle [. . .] to another person, of sharing the emotional experiences it has aroused, and of making perceptible how one is both affected and concerned, we would like to suggest that the persistence of these ways trace relatively stable facilitating paths.<sup>85</sup>

After our initial reaction of denunciation, sentiment or aesthetic connection to a story and image, it is as if we follow a channel, guiding our interpretation and response along certain lines. With any of these three 'topics', the producer of the text (photographer, reporter, author, painter) tries to use the text to construct a relation between the depicted (soldier, casualty) and the spectator, but to achieve the desired meaning the producer makes assumptions about the topic and imaginative resources spectators may be familiar and comfortable with. The producer of the text is always taking a risk. Additionally, audiences reflect not just on the representation and represented, but on the very process of representation or

<sup>82</sup> Readers may also explore the literature on moral panics, which contain explorations of the sources of apparent underlying social fears. See Stan Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (St. Albans, UK: Paladin, 1973); Stan Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (3rd edition) (London: Routledge, 2002); Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Bryan Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (London: Macmillan, 1978).

<sup>83</sup> Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*.

<sup>84</sup> Brigitte Nacos, 'Terrorism as Breaking News: Attack on America', *Political Science Quarterly*, 181:1, (2003), pp. 23–52.

<sup>85</sup> Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, p. 53.

mediation – as Zeba said earlier, ‘*To think*’ that mainstream television would broadcast the shooting dead of Muhammad al-Durrah was as shocking as the death itself.

### Can images disrupt beliefs and narratives? The role of personalisation

Commonly, the strong feelings evoked by images of war and suffering appear, in the *Shifting Securities* study at least, to reinforce prior beliefs and understandings. Many interviewees took a dogmatic stance, either avoiding news that challenged their understanding of events, or contesting such news, often drawing on other news sources to critique ‘official’ or ‘mainstream’ representations. But can images ever contribute to a change in an individual’s perceptions of a situation or process? Can images ‘cut through’ long-held discourses – of Muslim victimisation, of Western imperialism, of the malign intentions of politicians and militaries? Here we will look at how personalisation can be constructed in a news media text, and how such texts can illicit responses from hitherto-sceptical audiences.

In response to Boltanski’s argument about topics, Chouliaraki (2006) has suggested that indignation and denunciation are a necessarily *divisive* response to news, since there must be an enemy to be indignant at, or who caused the suffering we feel sentiment towards. However, empathy can offer ‘universality’ – the evocation of a potential common humanity. Personalised stories can construct a relation of empathy by placing the spectator as part of an undefined, common humanity that witnesses this suffering. Chouliaraki<sup>86</sup> gives as an example the case of television coverage of the stoning to death of a mother in Nigeria, Amina Lawal, in 2002. The story offers greater potential for connection to audiences than other stories she examines (including floods in India, starving children in Argentina, and 9/11) for three reasons. First and most superficially, the story is personalised: it is immediately about one woman, not a group, community or city. Amina Lawal is shown in a courtroom with her baby, followed by a protest by Amnesty International and then a violent mob in Nigerian streets. The sufferer is named, she is given agency – unlike flooded Indians or starving Argentineans, Lawal at least ‘had her baby’ – and even though she does not speak her passivity invokes a resource in a shared cultural repertoire: ‘woman as silent sufferer’. Her dignity is contrasted with the mob and *Shari’a* justices, positioned as barbaric persecutors. Second, audiences are encouraged to connect to the story as a situation that can be changed. A speaker for Amnesty encourages ‘everyone’ to sign a petition. This may be a minimal act asked of viewers, but it is presented as part of a process that could make a difference. Unlike the stories of floods, starvation and terrorism, this story asks ‘why?’ This is a story with a historical and political trajectory, not an isolated instance.

Finally, by inviting ‘everyone’ to sign the petition, the story appeals to an undefined public. Often, Western publics are addressed by national broadcasters as national publics; an address by Amnesty International is an address across many countries (as would an address by, say, Nelson Mandela or the UN). As such, it invokes ostensibly universal values and appeals to individual viewers as part of a

<sup>86</sup> Chouliaraki, *Spectatorship*, pp. 137–55.

universal consciousness. Overall, then, in the Amina Lawal story, viewers are asked to step outside of their ordinary concerns to share in empathy to an individual, to share an awareness of a political process whose outcome can be altered, and to be part of an undefined community rather than one with identifiable ties. Hence, while it takes more than a simple 'retinal flash' to provoke audiences to reconsider their relation to a story, a mix of images and narrative can be assembled into a news story that could have such effects.

Personalisation of an event offers one possible means by which a visual news report can lead an audience member to reconsider their perspective towards that event. Recall earlier that Luke dismissed the 'power' of images and expressed cynicism towards news media selection of images ('bandwagoning'). Yet he had cut out and kept an image himself, a family photograph with the dead circled. The image 'stuck with him'. In a discussion about media coverage of the 7/7 London bombings in 2005, Ella, a Catholic in her fifties living in Edinburgh, expressed scepticism towards what she described as 'scare stories' in the War on Terror propagated by popular newspapers and television (indeed many interviewees expressed scepticism towards officials' warnings that such an attack was likely). While she did not dismiss the 7/7 bombings as insignificant, she felt much media coverage was sensationalised. Indeed, she felt it the case that much coverage was 'designed to scare'. Her immediate response to the 7/7 bombings was informed by this expectation of news as misleading or disproportionate, and she exhibited a distanced relation to the story through much of her interview. However, she concedes some images may have impacted on her 'on a deeper level'. Here she talks of one victim of the bombings:

Ella: There was a girl from Glasgow, she was in her twenties, she'd, er, she was working in the City [of London] and er she ... sounded as if she was really nice, the kind of daughter you'd have been proud of. And I suppose when you've got children of your own you know you sort of. . .

Interviewer: You identify?

Ella: Yes uh huh.<sup>87</sup>

Hence we see the possibility that personalised stories can induce audiences to reconsider their view of a policy, process or event. Ella identifies with a fellow Scot, and as a mother, and it is this that makes her connect to the 7/7 London bombings as a valid, salient news event rather than dismiss it as sensationalist or 'scare stories'. However, personalised stories raise a tension for audiences along a universal-particular axis. Recall Sontag's suggestion earlier in this article that our loyalties are not to all humanity but particular, hence we care more about some victims than others. It is the *particularity* of the Glasgow girl's plight that Ella connects with, not her status as a human being *per se*. Is this the only way audiences connect to mediated, distant but personalised others?

Finally, the *Shifting Securities* study indicates one more condition necessary for images to disrupt individuals' beliefs and narratives. This is the social context of news consumption. Even when television and other media offer moments for reflection and reconsideration, it matters who viewers spend these moments with.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>87</sup> *Shifting Securities*, Strand A, Interview K15, lines 451–6.

<sup>88</sup> This is supported by several studies: Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (London: Routledge, 1991); Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars* (London: Routledge, 1996); John Fiske, 'Moments of Television:

Discussion with family and friends – ‘news talk’ – may encourage further reflection or, instead, lead individuals to re-envision the story through the beliefs and narratives they already held. An image might ‘cut through’ but be later re-interpreted depending on whether individuals talk in mixed circles or reinforcing ones.

## Conclusion

If we are to understand the ‘impact’ of media reports of conflict and atrocity, we must not assume images have primacy or any intrinsic shock value.<sup>89</sup> Instead, the challenge is to understand when, how and why images mesh or jar with narratives, beliefs and ideologies in the process of mediation between producers and audiences. This is a challenge for policymakers, journalists and audiences themselves. The *Shifting Securities* study suggests policymakers and journalists have little understanding of audiences’ media literacies and the processes through which individuals interpret news, alone and with others. And for audiences, it is a challenge to deduce what images can be trusted, how images are used by conflict participants, and how journalists and news producers use images to construct relations between events and audiences.

This article cautions against the maxim: ‘What the eye doesn’t see, the heart doesn’t grieve’. Many examples have been given to demonstrate why that maxim is misleading, including Fatima’s letter, but one more may summarise the argument. When the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published 12 cartoons in 2005, some of which depicted the Prophet Muhammad, and the cartoons were later reprinted in news media round the world, the resulting controversy was not only a reaction to the content of images. Also at issue was the representational practice, or the process of mediation:<sup>90</sup> the right to create such images, the right to publish them, and the right to condemn them. It was not just that cartoons representing the Prophet were forbidden in Islam, but that, for some Muslim people, the act of making such images public represented or signified a Western ‘arrogance’ and ‘insensitivity’, and parallel Muslim ‘victimhood’. Even when images appear the primary cause of offence, the offence can only be understood in terms of the relation between the images to longstanding political, religious and historical narratives, beliefs and ideologies.

We must also consider what audiences find believable. Returning to Fatima’s letter, it might be suggested that the letter encouraged readers to create a picture in their minds of a practice they already perceived to be plausible and present in Iraq – mistreatment and torture of Iraqi civilians by US military. A material image was unnecessary. A striking non-image in the 2003 Iraq War was WMD (Weapons

Neither the Text Nor the Audience’, in Ellen Seiter, H. Borchers, G. Kreutzner and E-M. Warth (eds), *Remote Control* (London: Routledge, 1989); Gillespie, *Television, Ethnicity and Cultural Change*; David Morley, *Television Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>89</sup> This is not an original claim but is often overlooked in policy and academic discussion of images as ‘weapons’. Media studies scholars have long established that the meaning of images is ‘anchored’ in surrounding text or commentary. See for example, Robert Hamilton, ‘Image and Context’, in Jeffrey Walsh and James Aulich (eds), *Vietnam Images* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

<sup>90</sup> *Shifting Securities*, Strand A, Interview MG2, lines 639–93.

of Mass Destruction): there were no pictures of WMD because there were none. Colin Powell's presentation to the UN on 5 February 2003 of satellite 'evidence'<sup>91</sup> of chemical and biological weapons in Iraq created images of what WMD *would* plausibly look like, such that when political leaders continued to speak of WMD in Iraq audiences could again create a picture in their minds. The widespread assumption that a story requires images to be sustained on news agendas<sup>92</sup> does not take into account the possibility that audiences can supply their own mental pictures or imagined images, or remember past images from events that seem analogous, rendering a story believable even if news organisations do not supply new images themselves.

Whatever knowledge we have concerning the relation between images and war through previous work on propaganda and studies of war and media, the context for understanding that relation grows ever more complex due to transformations in media technologies and the conditions of globalisation more generally.<sup>93</sup> Most difficult perhaps is identifying and understanding the narratives, beliefs and ideologies of the seemingly unknowable, diffuse audiences.<sup>94</sup> From the original theories of 'manufacturing consent' to the most recent media-policy-public interaction models, the perceptions of audiences are continually reduced to measures of 'public opinion', entirely neglecting the complex processes of representation and mediation demonstrated by this article<sup>95</sup> (one might even speculate that a relationship exists between these scholars' assumptions about media 'impact' on audiences and those of policymakers). The *Shifting Securities* study suggests the usefulness of integrated study of news producers, texts and audiences, and interdisciplinary teams are beginning new research in this field.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Colin L. Powell 'Remarks to the UN Security Council': (5 February 2003), {<http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/iraq/2003/iraq-030205-powell-un-17300pf.htm>}.

<sup>92</sup> Deborah Potter, 'Viewer Beware: Stations Are Re-enacting Scenes, Adding Sounds and Adopting Other Misleading Practices', *American Journalism Review*, 26 (February–March 2004).

<sup>93</sup> Examples of studies attempting to understand how war and media are altered by this new context include: McNair, *Cultural Chaos*; Hoskins and O'Loughlin, *War and Media*; and Steven R. Corman, Angela Trethewey, and H. L. Goodall, Jr. (eds), *Weapons of Mass Persuasion: Strategic Communication to Combat Violent Extremism* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008). Useful accounts of global uncertainty, within which we can discern relations between war and media as but a part, include Arjun Appadurai, *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007); and Philip Bobbitt *Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty-First Century* (London: Penguin, 2008)

<sup>94</sup> Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, *Audiences – A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination* (London: Sage, 1998).

<sup>95</sup> On manufacturing consent, see Edward S. Herman, and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The political economy of the mass media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988). On recent models, see Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston, *When the Press Fails*; Robinson, *The CNN Effect*; Robert W. Entman, *Projections of Power: Framing News, Public Opinion, and US Foreign Policy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>96</sup> For example the AHRC programme *Beyond Text: Sounds, Voices, Images, and Objects*; the AHRC-funded projects *Tuning In: Diasporic Contact Zones and the BBC World Service* {<http://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/diasporas/>}, and *Mediating and Commemorating the 2005 London Bombings*; the ESRC-funded project *Legitimising the discourses of radicalisation: Political violence in the new media ecology*.

**Appendix**

*Summary of demographic information:*

Total: 239 respondents

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Male	100	41.8
Female	139	58.2

<b>Age</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
0–17	44	18.4
18–24	44	18.4
25–34	58	24.3
35–44	38	15.9
45–54	27	11.3
55–64	18	7.5
65+	10	2.4

<b>Religion</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Christian	36	15.1
Muslim	166	69.5
Hindu	17	7.1
Jewish	2	0.8
No religion	11	4.6
Unknown	7	2.9

<b>Place of birth if not UK</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
South Asia	57	23.8
East Asia	2	0.8
Middle East <sup>1</sup>	17	7.1

<sup>1</sup> Includes Afghanistan and Turkey.