

The icons of this war...

Written by Pedro Meyer



I don't think it's too far fetched to assume that the main icons of this second US war in Iraq in 2004, still in process, will be the amateur digital pictures of the tortures performed on Iraqi detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad.

In spite of the tens of thousands of pictures produced by professional photographers during this war, these amateur images are the ones that I believe will mark this period in history. These will

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be emblematic , not only for the abuse performed on the physical integrity of the humans beings depicted in them, but will also stand in for the shame many feel for allowing themselves to be swayed in providing support for this war that indeed was not necessary. The use of systematic disinformation (remember the weapons of mass destruction?) and torture will probably become the downfall for this administration.

It will then have turned out to be that digital cameras became for the Bush administration what the tape recorder was for the Nixon White House.



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The images that stand out, at least in my imagination, of the first war in Iraq, are those that CNN broadcasted live, with night vision lenses that gave a green cast to the scene, showing how Baghdad was being bombarded. Back then CNN was still in the news business, whereas today they appear to be more in the advertising business, and you can tell that their loyalty is no longer to the news but to their advertisers whom they try not to alienate much in the style of Disney, by presenting information that is free of controversy. The levels of disinformation by the US news media are almost as appalling as those of the US government.



I participated in a Congress on Photojournalism in Lima Peru, last week, and one of the speakers was Cristóbal Bouroncle the head of Agence France-Presse (AFP) in Baghdad, who shared with us some very interesting information about the news business at his agency.

He mentioned that today, the accountants are just as important in the decision making process as the news editors. In other words, decisions made in the newsroom have to meet with budgetary concerns on an equal basis. In many ways this makes a lot of sense, as the operation is after all a business. However, one should also wonder when are profits the driving decision maker rather than the news, of course that is something we shall never find out.



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He also explained to us that western professional journalists are hard to come by, in the context of Iraq, because obviously the security risks are so high. While local photographers are doing a very good job as they all have access that westerners do not enjoy, among many other reasons: language and belonging to certain tribal groups.

Cristobal also noted that they get paid far less than western photojournalists, which is a big plus with the accountants. And last but not least, with digital cameras, they are able to send out people new to photography to take pictures with minimal training, and they come back with very good imagery. Interestingly enough among other very revealing bits of information, Cristobal estimated that roughly 50% of the consumption of AFP pictures sent out over the wires is consumed these days by internet outlets, and not just by printed news media any more.



If the most emblematic images from this war were photographed by amateurs, if agencies are able to send out people to take photographs who have never taken pictures, but have access to certain places, and if we are into a tidal wave of imagery coming in from all the digital cameras that are flooding the world; I am sure that traditional photojournalism as is being taught today in schools all over the world, better have a second look at reality and be prepared to tell their students that things are no longer how they used to be and therefore need to adjust their expectations.

The same thing might also prove to be of interest to all those active photojournalists today, who are seeing their bread and butter documentary images being displaced by pictures of celebrities and movie stars.

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