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Welcome to Media at Risk, a podcast from the Center for Media at Risk at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Welcome to Gitmo Media, the podcast that's going to examine how we experience and understand the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base and its complex history. We'll be considering how various media forms have shaped the perspectives of visitors, personnel, and detainees at the site and how they have used media to enhance public knowledge of this exceptional and often forgotten space. My name is Daniel Grinberg, and I'm a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Media Risk at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication. I'm joined by my colleague Mira McCammon, an Annenberg PhD student and law student.

Daniel and I have been thinking and writing about detention in the context of Guantanamo for the last several years. I went to Gitmo as a freelance journalist with Vice back in June 2017 and also wrote my master's thesis on the history of the Guantanamo Bay detainee library. And I've studied the uses of entertainment media for personnel and detainees at Gitmo, as well as digital media activist projects that have critiqued the detention complex. With our joint background, we wanted to come together and think not only about the history of the prison, but also. Potential problematic futures.

Our first episode of Gitmo Media will focus on practitioners who visit Guantanamo Bay and try to convey their impressions of the contentious activities occurring there amidst and in spite of rigorous information controls, with only select journalists and documentarians getting access to the site and a strict regime of censorship being enforced. What we see of and hear about Guantanamo can be circumscribed in strategic ways thinking through the issues of navigating access and creative expression, this first episode will feature an interview with documentarian Joanna Hamilton. I mean, I went into it fully knowing. That there were immense restrictions with this project. And so that was my, my mindset was constantly, you know, what is the way around it? What am I going to be able to show.

Hamilton is the director of the film 1971, which explored the massive FBI surveillance operation known as COItelpro. As well as Discreet Airlift, a short film about a North Carolina town and its role in post 9/11 rendition flights. Today I'll be speaking to Hamilton about our 2018 short film, The Trial, which can now be viewed on The Guardian's website. The film looks at the legal team representing Guantanamo detainee Omar al Baluchi. Afterwards, stick around to hear Mira and me discuss some of the lingering questions and issues that this interview raises. So first I wanted to ask you, what was the process of getting permission to film at Guantanamo? I mean, I guess there are several different ways you can go to Guantanamo.

Very often you can go as part of a media tour, which is really what the DOD really prefers the journalists go on. I was interested in going as part of the military commissions and so for that, you know, as with any trip to Guantanamo as a as part of the The press, you need media credentials. And so I had a letter. I was working with Field of Vision who are connected in turn with the Intercept. So I had a letter from them. And so essentially there's an office within the Department of Defense within the Pentagon to whom you inquire. They put out a call basically to say, you know, the hearings are going to happen on such and such a date. And you need to let us know by, you know, 1 time if you are interested in coming.

So I, I, you know, I acquired this letter and this credential and then inquired if I could go. Did they ask you anything about what the project was going to be about or try to figure out anything about what you're going to be filming beforehand? Those questions came post hoc, once I was down there, and they became more. Curious about what the film was going to be about. Part of it is just they genuinely want to know and check that you are a representative of a media organization.

And then secondly, in my instance, I was sort of asking for special things being sort of embedded, if you will, with this legal team embedded in the sense that I was really interested in covering what they were doing as opposed to any of the other legal teams or You know, sitting for the time that were times that were permitted in the courtroom. For example, I was requesting, you know, things to happen at slightly odd hours, like I was wanting to go out, you know, and, you know, watch the team, you know, do on their early morning routines and things like that. And so then it just becomes really also a logistics issue because at Guantanamo you are monitored at all times.

You have a, you have a sort of an attache who comes with you wherever you are and who monitors what you're filming and or who, you know, assists. You and drives you around when you are filming or conducting interviews. Well, you mentioned the escort that was with you. Could you talk a little bit more about what kinds of restrictions were placed upon you and how you worked within those limits and around those limits? So there are very, very strict rules about what you can and can't do at Guantanamo. That said, those rules shift consistently. You know, you can film in and around the tent, the press tents that the press are allowed to say and you are allowed to obviously film in the press conference rooms, but it's in. Incredibly infuriating to film down there.

Otherwise there are many, many restrictions. But for example, you know, one of the, one of the buildings, the former commissions building was previously, you know, out of bounds to film, and by the time I got there, it was actually we were able to film it. You are essentially and you become very reliant on the geography of the place because I wouldn't have access to the detainee who was the subject of, you know, the film and so obviously the, you know, the lawyers. Become the prism through which I was making this film. You know, you become very reliant on the on what you can film and what you can film really is the is the geography of the place, you know, it's the mountain, it's the wildlife.

There are iguanas and vultures in our film, and you know, it's the sea and the dramatic landscapes and you know, some of the buildings that you are able to, you know, some of the vehicles, the boats, a couple of the military personnel, you're not allowed to show anybody's face, for example, so you filmed the back of people's heads and feet and You know, with the lawyers that I was filming, I was obviously able to have much greater access.

And I was also able to access their private spaces, which, so that was the most enticing obviously to be able to be in their private spaces in their apartments and and the places where they operate, you know, I know, and out of hours kind of, you know, I didn't have access, unfortunately, to, you know, anywhere where they were conducting formal official legal briefings with their client. Did you have to go through the public affairs review of your film, and what was that process of censorship like? Yes, we did. You have to do that. Anybody who goes down there has to do that. You know, essentially they really, they don't review for content in the sense of the, you know, the spoken word, which was, you know, not not a concern. That was a great relief.

That was not a concern for the legal team. It's principally, you know, the visuals as I've described, you know, there are certain radar installations. that you're not allowed to film and such like. And so it's really again, a more of a pro forma, you know, checking that you haven't filmed somebody's face that you're not allowed to. So they're not actually screening for content. Were your subjects who are public figures working on a very high profile case with high legal stakes tentative about appearing on camera or making certain kinds of statements? The legal team that I was working with were definitely they are the most. Press friendly.

And so which is why I was sort of drawn to the case, uh, and press friendly in the sense of, you know, that there's obviously not a massive amount of coverage of Guantanamo. And has not been there hasn't been a massive amount of coverage of them. It really sort of stemmed out of this initial conversation that I had with Aka Pradha, who is one of the lawyers. You know, to my great surprise, I started a conversation with her thinking that I would be trying to do one thing and ended the call by thinking maybe I could make a film, but their client Amar had to give permission and so After we had a pretty extensive conversation about parameters, he had to give permission. So I then sent him a statement about why I wanted to make the film, and then he ultimately gave permission.

From there though, I will say that it proceeded sort of on a case by case basis. I mean, there were certainly parameters and there's just a tremendous amount of classified information that we were dealing with and their jobs, you know, sort of, you know, are. intrinsically linked to what they can and cannot discuss. And so they were going to be as careful and as discerning as possible during the filming to prevent anything damage or or preemptive from being included. I mean, we would confer on things before switching the camera on, but obviously most of the, you know, most of the non-classified activities and conversations were totally within bounds.

But you know, it was obviously it was Immensely frustrating, you know, you know, I'm seeking to get the most information and then, you know, without doubt frustrating for them too, but there's just a tremendous amount that they are not able to tell me. But they were very, you know, open and upfront about what they could and couldn't tell me. When in doubt, I would pose the question and they would say, you know, I'm sorry, I can't, I can't give you an answer on that without divulging classified information. What advice would you give to other documentarians working on sensitive issues of national security, government secrecy, and limited transparency? Um, you know, I mean, I think, you know.

Pick wisely, surround yourself with people who know about the story from all angles, if possible, you know, that's sort of what I tend to do. I tend to, you know, really try and mind people for as much information as I can get, you know, you know, protect yourself, just in terms of, you know, sort of, you know, be aware in terms of your, you know, your own communications. of what you are, um, communicating, you know, both electronically and, you know, over the phone, but I would say that, you know, there are, there are ways and you know, the the same sort of age old um, you know, parameters apply, you know, by by cultivating sources, you may find a, you know, a way into a story in unexpected ways. If you had encountered less restrictions.

What do you imagine your project would have looked like, what other kinds of aesthetic or logistical choices might you have made? How long do we have? Yes, big question. I mean, I went into it fully knowing that there were immense restrictions with this project. And so that was my, my mindset was constantly, you know, what is the way around it? What am I going to be able to show? How can I film this in a way that is both interesting, revealing, and, you know, compelling, um, to me, and obviously, then, you know, hopefully to a viewer too. I would say the other thing obviously that that that influences all of that is budget. And, you know, I, it was really, um, it was a, you know, a tough sell in some quarters.

I would love to be able to make a longer film, were they not such enormous limitations, you know, I had one member of the team. say, you know, come with me on a, you know, on a on one of these field trips, you know, she was talking about, you know, going to Pakistan, you know, stuff like that that would have been really amazing to do that can really flesh out the story, you know, who knows, you never know what kind of material you'll you'll return with. But, you know, I would have loved to have done that had I, you know, the time, the money and the budget. In your eyes, what role does documentary film play in shaping public discourse around the issues of Guantanamo Bay?

You know, I think the documentary film, you know, has a way of just simply moving people in a way that You know, print pieces and reportage and maybe don't, you know, with Guantanamo in particular, perhaps because it's a place that we don't see so much of. I remember my editor saying to me the first time he was looking at the footage, you know, he was like, it's just so interesting to see what this place just looks like. But I also think that, you know, you It's hard to convey, you know, what happens down there.

So insofar as I was able to, you know, get in with this legal, with the legal team that I was following in their downtime, in their, you know, off hours, in their, you know, preparation time to go to court, you know, in the film there's a scene of the two of the lawyers making breakfast for the detainees. We're cooking for the guys who come for the trial this morning for the military commission. It's the 2nd day of the military commission, so not everybody has to come, uh, but if they want to come, then. Um, we provide the breakfast and the lunch for them. It's nothing, you know, massively revelatory, but it's something I think that's been filmed before. The scene with the egg where the egg misses the Tupperware it gets me every time.

So it was again, that was, I was sort of, you know, gratified to hear that people were responding to that that scene because it's sort of something so, so simple. And that is at once so humane and subversive, you know, you, you, I just think that, you know, most people haven't stopped to think, which, you know, people have busy lives, but you know, stop to think about, you know, these lawyers who are defending, defending the men accused of, you know, planning September 11th, you know, and who do it, you know, who sort of are giving it their all in very difficult circumstances. It's a tricky, you know, thing looking at these kinds of Pictures.

I mean, obviously, with Guantanamo, there's so little that you can film, but you know, just in terms of the aesthetic, you know, you know, hopefully, you know, there's no sort of unproblematic way. To show, you know, the degradation of, of a person or, you know, of, of, of values, you know, obviously, I think we all have a desire not to look at, you know, the world's sort of, you know, cruelest cruelest moments and most difficult moments. But, you know, I think it's a I think it's important if you craft and care are, you know, something that's so simple as sort of preparing breakfast can hopefully be, you know, revelatory, even though it's so, so simple. And then finally, could you talk a little bit about some of the responses from people who have seen the film?

You know, it's sort of achieving what I hoped it would achieve in in in the sense of just shining a light, where a light hasn't been shone before, getting people to think about what is happening, what's been, what's happening in their name, what is still going on? Why is it still going on? You know, when will the, you know, the culmination be? You know, what will happen? And people have responded, you know, extremely positively to the, you know, the people in the film and to the work that they do. Thinking through your interview with Jana, I'm pondering just how very hard it is to tell the story of Gitmo through a single medium like a documentary or an investigative story. Um, how, how did you learn about her work? That's a good question.

I first knew her work through the film 1971, her first feature film. I wrote about it in relation to her use of the Freedom of Information Acts to try to access FBI files and try to figure out what happened with COINTER. Something that comes to mind as I'm thinking about the challenges of understanding Gitmo from afar. You've spent years now uh trying to understand the policies and practices and I'm. I'm wondering, I'm wondering how that distance has translated into your own work. Yeah, I think it's important to reflect on both the proximity to a site and also the distance from a site. Eric Gandini, who co-directed the film Gitmo The New Ways of War, remarked that perhaps the worst place to be to understand Guantanamo Bay is to be at Guantanamo Bay.

So sometimes we tend to privilege access and. Uh, proximity to a site too much and we forget that we can lose criticality if we're too attached to access and instead think about other kinds of methodologies, other kinds of perspectives. Uh, so for me it was about getting access to different kinds of documents. One of the things that I'm thinking about is just the challenge that Joanna faced as a documentarian who's creating a work about a place that most of her viewers will never have an opportunity to to see firsthand. I guess, you know, it's something that I've grappled with in my own work as well is just how do you tell the story of a place that is so.

So exceptional and so, so far away from most, uh, you know, most Americans daily life and by extension, you know, the lives of most people scattered around the world. And I think Joanna does a really good job of humanizing the people who are in this very paradoxical and contradictory position of trying to figure out how do you. Deal with these very these very challenging legal and ethical quandaries, uh, it's a very challenging thing, particularly to do in only only 20 minutes, but I think by focusing on the subjects that she does, it gives us a way in, it gives us empathy with. People that we would otherwise not really get to experience or meet in our daily lives.

I think about projects like the Guantanamo docket at the New York Times that have tried to, you know, keep track of the countries of origin uh the legal documents tied to to every single detainee and it's exhausting to think about even as a just a a reader of of the docket itself. Yeah, the amount of secrecy that goes on in Guantanamo is just immense and to try to wade through the bureaucratic process of getting access to the site of having to negotiate what kinds of information you can reveal, what kinds of information you can even learn about in the first place.

It really takes a skilled practitioner to be able to not only extract that information but then make it engaging to audiences, particularly mainstream audiences who would again never really get to experience or engage with those kinds of facts before. And I'm wondering, did did Joanna talk to you a little bit about how she picked. Uh, Omar Al Baluchi is as sort of the, the center of her investigation. Well, she started by talking to Alka Purdan, I believe, and that was her way in. I think they connected and because Pradha was representing Al Baucci, that became the center that became the focus for the project. So it really was the lawyers who became the way in who allowed Hamilton to uh follow them and give them and to give her.

A greater deal of access to the larger legal complexities of Guantanamo. They have a lot of power, don't they? They do, but at the same time, they're also subject to the courts and to the very Byzantine and complicated particularities of the law at Guantanamo through the military courts, which are even. Uh, less less transparent and uh less subject to US law as we know it. So they're, they're both powerful, but at the same time they're, uh, still trying to figure out all of the particularities of the site just as much as the documentarians are. I think that's a really important point to make.

And I think that the word Byzantine is, is, does, does do justice to the legal labyrinth that both, you know, journalists, documentarians, uh, and the rest of us really have to suffer through to try to find clarity. In this ever obfuscated system. Absolutely, and I think that's where documentarians can really play an important role in giving us perspectives that we otherwise wouldn't be able to see, to give us, uh, voices that we otherwise wouldn't hear and to really show us that there are people who are working behind the scenes to try to make this process a little bit more transparent, a little bit. More ethical, a little bit more. Understandable. Yeah, I had, I had never seen a documentary of Gitmo before.

I growing up I'd really relied primarily on the words of journalists to to tell stories of of detainees and their lawyers. So thank you, Daniel. Thank you, Mara. And that concludes our episode for today. Gitmo Media is a podcast series that seeks to address questions of power, control, and risk, as they relate to one of the world's most controversial detention facilities. We'd like to express our gratitude to Joanna Hamilton for taking time to talk to us about her experiences at Gitmo and her insights into its many paradoxes. Barbie Zelizer directs the Center for Media Risk. This episode was edited by Erin Shapiro and produced by Daniel Grinberg and me, Mira McCammon. To learn more about the series, check out our supplementary material at the Media Risk website at ASC Mediaisk.org.