This transcript was automatically generated. The transcript may contain errors or omissions.

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.

In our third and final episode, we include an interview with Mohamedou Ould Slahi, a former Gitmo detainee.

My name is Mary McCammon, and I'm a doctoral student in law and communication at the Center for Media Risk at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication.

This podcast is made possible through the support of the Center for Media at Risk and its director, Professor Barbie Zelizer.

In the minutes that follow, my colleague Daniel Grinberg explores Mohamedou Ould Slahi's journey from one of the darkest detention facilities to Mauritania.

Afterwards, stick around to hear Daniel and me discuss some of our responses to his reflections.

Thank you for listening.

First, I wanted to ask you if you could tell me about your process of writing Guantanamo Diary and why you initially decided to do it.

Writing for me was always something that came natural to me.

When I was a child.

I used to write stuff on the margin of my notebooks.

And then sometimes even embarrassing stuff that is very intimate in Guantanamo Bay.

Like I was so thirsty to share with the other world because the forbidden thing for me is to talk. I can't tell no one anything. I cannot call my family. I cannot share anything with anyone. So, and as the Germans say, Paper is very friendly friend because you can confide to a paper anything you want. So then I started like I wasn't allowed to have a pen or a paper because my level, because they have classes, level 1, level 2, level 3. My class did not allow me anything.

So what I did, I used to borrow stuff quote unquote steel and papers and then I write a lot of stuff and then I hide it. So I wrote random stuff about my journey and random stuff about the thing I learned in prison like English phrases, and then everything was confiscated, taken away when they discovered.

And I had to wait many years until I met my lawyers mid 2005. And then I saw my window because you can communicate with the lawyer. You can send them stuff. It doesn't mean they, they can publish it, but they can still see. Then I start writing as soon as I met them and then I, I would write very small.

And then put in batches and then send them and then remember what's the page and then I keep writing and then it was detained for about 8 years.

Until the government allowed the public to see the heavily redacted.

And why did you decide to write in English, which is your fourth language?

Because when I wrote in Arabic.

Uh, German, French, all mixed, and then it was taken away and then everything like they said has anything to do with foreign language, especially Arabic.

This is this AQ code.

They communicating to the world, you know, all of this like propaganda.

I wanted just to cut all of that short and just write in everyday mortal English and then.

The public at large because they wouldn't say, OK, we, so what does it say?

Because Like if American lawyers are told this is a code, they would, they have no argument.

Did knowing that the government was going to be reviewing all the parts of your book, did it affect what you wrote or how you wrote it?

Uh, when I wrote, I, I had no idea about the process, so I was very optimistic because I was telling myself at the end of the day.

The United States is a country ruled by law, not by randomness.

Those are lawyers.

It's a very good signal that I have my lawyers here.

We can go to court and I will say, you know what, I didn't do anything.

I'm going home.

I'm going home because you are a country of law and I know you, you, you don't have any proof because you can only have proof if something has happened, but something never happened.

You can never have proof for something that never happened, so I did not know all of this process and so.

And I was very excited that my narrative that I provided in the book would be published so that my family understand my side of the story and not being bombarded day and night with this very skewed, very one-sided narrative that the US government offers.

But I was mistaken on many levels, on many fronts.

One, the government actually was reading what I was sending my lawyers.

And that was like the biggest like shock to me.

And the other thing is that the United States seems not to come to a final decision whether or not or not they want to be a democracy, a country ruled by law.

OK, we will rule by law if it's beneficial to us and we will break the law if it's beneficial to us.

So it's like a hybrid between a dictatorship.

And a democracy, the government itself, the person who is going to prosecute you, which is very weird to me because I felt the pain of living under autocratic regime and I hate autocratic regime.

You have no idea because you will only hate them if you really live under them.

Like Americans have no idea.

How it feels when someone can decide over your life and you have no recourse whatsoever.

Did you find writing about your experiences helpful for dealing with the pain they were causing you, or did you feel like it was, the remembering it was causing you even more pain and make, make you regret doing it?

At first, I was afraid, afraid of retribution uh retribution, so to speak, you know, but I was emboldened more and more when I wrote, and then there was no retribution.

Then I wrote there was no retribution.

And, and then I came to the conclusion that, you know, one of the beautiful things that I learned from Americans, democracy dies in darkness.

So back home in Mauritania, They would send agents to my family.

They said, if you talk to the press, your son will never ever see alarm.

And in what at the same time, they were telling me, if you talk to your lawyer, if you cooperate with your lawyer, we will not release you.

So it was a coordinated thing and we are very vulnerable because I'm not Jared Kushner, I'm not his father who can get off, uh, you know, because he has money.

You know, I'm not married into power, you know, so I'm very vulnerable.

Like what helps me, what keeps me people like me and you lie, it's very powerful rule of law.

That's the only thing we have.

And so I was scared mostly from, but the fact that I committed.

You know, my narrative to papers was so liberating, and I can tell you with a great degree of confidence that had I not written my book, I would ever have the opportunity to speak like you.

Absolutely not.

What did you expect to happen to the book once you finished it and you sent all of it to the lawyers?

Yeah.

I was very naive.

I thought it would be published as soon as it comes to the.

And it would give me a fighting chance.

It would just like be a very small contribution of the proverbial David against Goliath.

I know the US government is very committed, very smart.

They are very dedicated people.

They are people who are specialists in talking to the press, and they decide narrative, they decide who is good, who is bad.

It was like a very weak attempt.

You know, believing with this very unwavering belief in eternal justice, that justice will always catch up to people.

If people understand something, they will always opt for justice, no matter who they are, no matter what religion, no matter what creed, and I was just appealing.

To this part of the people of the world, especially Americans, because Americans are the ones who elected those people who hurt me because you're the boss.

You elect someone and I, I have to pay for whomever you elect.

I have to pay for what they do to me.

And I'm always like on the edge of a razor. hoping and praying that people in the United States don't elect the bad people.

It's very, really bad, you know, it's very bad, very bad situation.

What was your reaction to having more than 2600 redactions to your text?

I may be wrong, but I understand from the US law that it's forbidden to redact something that is not to classify something that is not classified.

That doesn't need to be classified.

So what they classify, it's very random to me.

Like, for instance, they like pronounce like uh he or she, uh, especially if it's a she, you know, they uh take out all the uh female uh pronouns.

And at one point that Uh, I think I was crying and then they reacted that.

The things that are very easy to uh to understand from the context.

And I can tell you that I met someone who was in the team who redacted the book.

And my understanding is that uh some people did not like the way it was redacted.

People were redacting the book.

The, the reason it seems to me was just to avoid embarrassment.

And then what was the process of unredacting the diary and And how did it feel when it came out?

It was very hard because it was written many years ago and I have nothing to base on except my memory.

I remember the dates.

That's something that is sealed in my memory.

But those very long portions, I have to remember where did I put what?

I also wrote some poetry and this was all lost because Of the reduction.

What kinds of responses have you received to the book?

The fact that it's A best seller in many countries including the United States, Germany, it's numbers don't lie, means that People really want to know what the government is doing behind closed doors, if only out of curiosity.

What really people like is that they always keep telling me the simplicity because there is no, no, no, no, no complication.

Maybe my limited vocabulary help make the book very uh simple and I like simple stuff because After going through so much, I don't want anything complicated.

I just want very simple stuff.

I know it's now being turned into a film.

What are your thoughts about that and what is your involvement in that project?

I'm very happy.

Uh, I wanted to travel and meet the people involved in the movie.

As you know, I'm forbidden from traveling per uh US order to my government.

I would say illegal order because it's uh violating the United Nations Charter that countries should not violate other countries' sovereignty.

And violate human rights as I understand that every human being cannot be punished outside the law without due process, which I'm being punished for the last 19 years when they took my passport and forbid me to leave the country.

I think it's going to be very good and it's just going to To be a little bit different than the propaganda movies that showing like the heroes doing all the good stuff and You know, badass to torturing people to keep the country safe.

Dirty Harry and the rooster Cogburn, stuff like that, you know.

Well, something that I've studied and that I've written a lot about is the access of media.

At Guantanamo Bay.

So I've written both about the movie theaters for the people who work at Guantanamo Bay, but then I've also written about the library for the detainees and the uh access to video games and movies and television.

So I know you write about that in your book and you talk about how it gave you a sense of hope to be able to see humans who were not in the situation you were in.

Could you just talk a little bit about how media affected your experience there?

So, After about 9 years in prison, so we were allowed to watch uh limited channels, channels that the government chooses.

And it was like a floodgate.

At first I was very scared because sometimes if you don't know something.

It doesn't bother you.

News can be very intense.

For instance, whenever I see somewhere, anywhere in the world when I see like uh terror attack.

And then I said, oh my God, now I have to pay for it, because every time something like that happens, we pay immediately, that's the thing is.

Why?

Because the guy is brown just like me.

And If he's not brown, he said he's a Muslim, which I am too.

If he's neither of those, he's Arab, which I am too, so I, I checked all the boxes.

And but it's also good.

Like I can watch like movies, I can watch people like uh speaking in Arabic cause I never heard like my native tongue in so many years and later on I, I was given access to the library of detainees.

And that was good.

It was a very good improvement that I welcomed very well.

Were there any movies or books that you read or saw that particularly stood out to you?

I know in the diary you mentioned, uh, Catcher in the Rye is one example, but were there other things that really stood out to you?

Yeah, a lot.

I read really a lot, a lot.

I, I like, like, uh, Anna Frank, of course, because She was from the same area where I lived in Germany.

I read the Britannica, British Encyclopedia.

I just kept reading, reading it, you know, this may be very like weird, but I love this uh chicken soup for the so.

At first I did not like it.

I said, this guy is crazy.

It's like, This is so unrealistic, but when I went through a lot of pain and suffering, And then I said I want to read it again, but I couldn't find it.

Because they don't have it anymore or someone took it.

One of the books also that changed my life is the seven habits, you know, COVID.

Not to mention those Arabic books like volumes.

Uh, I have one last question, which is, after you've shared your story and after it's circulated, what do you think the American people still don't understand about Guantanamo Bay and the war on terror?

I think that There are American people are not one person, so there are people in the United States who have this very xenophobic tendency.

They are so blind that they don't care about the rule of law, because if the casualty is the other is a Mexican or a Muslim or someone they don't like.

They don't care about it.

They don't think twice about it.

Even if they were children, they deserve to die.

If they were one year old child, so I'm not talking about those people, but I'm just talking about people, average American who have some level of education that they care about their country, care about the rule of law.

They trust the government too much.

Like if the government gives them a story, a very beautiful story, or This guy is responsible for killing you.

So believing the government, I think it's very, very problematic and it's very undemocratic because democracy is based on checking the government and not taking them to the, to the words.

That's democracy.

Otherwise, you become like us and please do not be like us.

You know, it's not cool to trust your government.

It's not cool to say, oh, I believe the government.

They do the right thing.

I tell you no, they don't do the right thing because power corrupts.

Also, like, a lot of people are, it's not me, it's him.

I mean this guy is from Africa or from Saudi Arabia or from Yemen.

I don't care as long as it's not me, it's not my neighborhood.

I don't care.

So this is very shortsighted because when you accepted that your government kidnapped people from overseas and put them in Guantanamo Bay, now you accept that they check you on airport and take your iPhone and force you to open your iPhone for them, and you cannot say no, and only God knows.

So Daniel, I'm, I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about what the experience was like interviewing Mohamedou Ould Slahi.

I was really moved by how generous he was as a person, how willing he was to talk about his experiences in order to share with the world what he went through, how kind and forgiving he was, and also how funny he was.

Those are things that you can kind of tell in the book, but being able to speak to him directly.

And I think the listeners will hear it in the interview just how warm and kind he is as a person.

So that was really wonderful to get to experience.

I was also just struck by his, uh, his description of American politics.

There's that line where he, he states very truthfully that he's not Jared Kushner and and really goes into detail about, you know, what, uh, kind of the factors that produced Gitmo.

Yeah, he's very, very perceptive, as I think it's very clear in the interview, his understanding of American politics.

Obviously he's coming from it from a very strange perspective because he doesn't have the luxury, the privilege to ignore American politics.

He's felt the weight of them very, very firsthand, um, but his understanding of the nuances of American politics and his ability to articulate them in ways that are very sharp are are.

Wonderful to see and to hear, and I think there's a lot we can learn from him.

And then I wanted to ask you, Mira, so you've also read this book and then you've heard this interview, what did you take away from it that maybe you didn't necessarily know from the book or learn from other sources from hearing this?

Well, I mean, I think that The book is, is, uh, initially at first read very frustrating because of all of the redactions, and it's hard to really, you know, describe them uh in a, in a holistic way because there's so many of them.

Uh, and so for me, you know, the book is a reminder of Uh, censorship and control.

And in, in many ways, that's in part why it was so refreshing to listen to the interview because you get this, um, you know, a very forgiving, uh, smooth, not fragmented description of a, a former detainee's experiences at Gitmo, which is, uh, still very rare because so many of the narratives that we've seen and heard are are mediated through lawyers, uh, mediated through journalists and even the You know, guards at the detention facilities talking about their experiences with detainees.

And so I think what is promising about this, this moment that we're in in 2019 is that there are now, um, hundreds of former Gitmo detainees who may take to different mediums to express their own firsthand experiences and so Mohamedou Ould Slahi's.

Uh, obviously at the forefront of that, that movement.

I was able to talk to him a little bit about it, but I'm also curious what you think will happen with this movie, because we've thought about documentaries, we've thought about cartoons, we've thought about the written word, but how do you see that diary transitioning to fiction film and how do you imagine that they'll be able to convey the realities of his experiences cinematically?

I mean, on one hand, it just seems like a very bizarre endeavor, right?

Uh, and on the other hand, I mean, I'm, I'm.

Not, uh, I don't make movies, right?

So I can't really fully speculate as to some of the creative decisions that they're going to have to grapple with, but I am very interested in how, uh, a dramatic film of this nature might attract a different type of audience.

Uh, you know, I'm thinking particularly of, uh, you know, Not just millennials, but, uh, you know, the younger folks, uh, some of whom, you know, even your students, right, who, uh, still confuse, you know, Abu Ghraib with Gitmo.

And is it possible that a dramatic film, a drama of this nature might reach them in a different way?

Um, that to me is a very exciting possibility.

Absolutely and something that we've been trying to think through throughout this series is how these different media presents different opportunities, different creative strategies, different audiences that you can engage so it will be really interesting to see how it does end up playing out if it is something that reinvigorates the conversations around Guantanamo Bay around the issues of detention and torture.

Or if like some of the other Guantanamo movies that we've seen, doesn't really break through into the mainstream conversation as much as it could have.

And, and just for our listeners' sake, do you know details about the production schedule?

I don't.

I know that Benedict Cumberbatch is producing, so I think the fact that someone of that level of fame is attached bodes well for its ability to to attract a white audience, but I don't yet know how.

Far into the production pipeline it is, but it's definitely something that we'll have to watch out for.

Yeah, and there's a real question of, you know, what what can Benedict Cumberbatch bring to this?

I think one of the things that fascinates me as well in in your interview is that you live in Philadelphia and Mohamedou Ould Slahi was Skyping with you from Mauritania and, you know, a decade ago.

Uh, this, this would not have have been in the cards, really.

Uh, so I don't know, it feels surreal that we're now in this time where Technology is permitting uh kind of post Gitmo communicative landscape.

Absolutely, and the fact that he's not allowed to leave Mauritania really prevents his voice from resonating further without these kinds of communications technologies that we take for granted now.

But yeah, you're absolutely right, the facts that I can just for free call someone in Mauritania and access this whole wealth of knowledge and then share it with our listeners is wonderful and.

You know, so important for marginalized voices and for activists and advocates to be able to reach that kind of global platform that they deserve.

Thank you so much for listening to our series and we hope you enjoyed Gitmo Media.

And that's a wrap.

And that concludes our final episode in the series.

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.

Thanks for listening.

We'd like to express our gratitude to Mohamedou Ould Slahi for his courage, his advocacy, and for taking the time to talk to us about his experiences at Gitmo.

Barbie Zelizer directs the Center for Media at Risk.

This episode was edited by Aaron Shapiro and produced by Mira McCammon and me, Daniel Grinberg.

To learn more about this series, check out our supplementary material at the Media at Risk website at ASC Mediaisk.org.