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Wi: Journal of Mobile Media, Spring 2008

The online version of this article can be found at:

<https://doi.org/10.65968/NXCX6690>

Lévesque, Maroussia, and Jason Lewis. "What Else Do We Lose When We Make People Disappear? The Passage Oublié Project". *Wi: Journal of Mobile Media*. Spring (2008). Web.
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Figure 1: Touchscreen installed at Pearson Airport

<http://passageoublie.net/>

We are all suspects in airports. Post 9-11 fears have generated security measures where individuals are scrutinized, searched and profiled at airports gates. Although these searches vary from the ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ in secret prisons, the bottom line argument is identical: better safe than sorry. For this reason, passengers at the Pearson airport are in a particularly conducive position to reflect upon the ramifications of the preemptive war rhetoric.

Passage Oublié is an interactive artwork about extraordinary rendition, the practice whereby terrorist suspects are made to disappear in a global network of detention

campus. This installation takes the form of a touchscreen kiosk at Toronto's Pearson International Airport, July 2007 to May 2008. As an estimated six million passengers on their way to nearby security gates are about to surrender to increasingly invasive searches, they are prompted to respond to information about the conditions of secret detention of presumed terrorists. Since extraordinary renditions are carried out on regular commercial jets, civilian airports are one of the few—if not sole—spaces where civilian worlds and the secret network of detention sites overlap. As such, airports are prime terrain for engaging with the practice of extraordinary renditions. It is in this context that *Passage Oublié* displays information about rendition flights and asks travelers the following questions:

Are rendition flights an acceptable means of dealing with the threat of terrorism? How is a collaborating country's credibility as a defender of human rights affected? Does the end justify such means when it comes to the 'war on terror'? Are the liberal democracies involved in this activity compromising their cherished principle that one is innocent until proven guilty?

Responses to these questions can be sent to the kiosk using a mobile phone or a laptop with the airport's wireless network. These messages are visually animated along flight trajectories on a world map featuring airports involved in the extraordinary rendition network. In order to describe *Passage Oublié* it is first necessary to provide more detail about extraordinary renditions.

EXTRAORDINARY RENDITIONS

Legal extradition, legal rendition and extraordinary rendition

Rendition is the process of physically transferring an individual from one legal jurisdiction to another where he or she faces criminal charges. Rendition often occurs during an extradition process. For example, a form of legal extradition would be when Chile's former military dictator Augusto Pinochet was extradited from Britain to Spain to face war crimes allegations. Extraditions are strongly regulated by treaties, conventions and historical precedents. In this framework, rendition generally follows a lengthy set of extradition procedures initiated by the state laying criminal charges. Many countries refuse to render an individual to a jurisdiction where it is either acknowledged or suspected that torture will be performed, citing obligations to abide by international conventions against torture (Weaver et al., 2006).

Passage Oublié deals with a different type of rendition. In the context of the war on terror, extralegal or extraordinary renditions covertly ferry presumed terrorists through a network of unmonitored, unregulated prisons outside national and international legal systems, where no laws need be respected and detainees have no access to legal counsel. People—often Muslim men—disappear into this web of secret detention sites after being intercepted at customs, captured during armed conflict, denounced by informers, turned in for reward money, or kidnapped by intelligence agencies. Individuals subjected to extraordinary rendition become ghost prisoners with no official recognition of their detention, under the control of captors whose operation outside any legal framework relieves them of responsibility for any mistreatment that takes place during transport and detention. Jets leased from private companies transfer terror(ized) suspects to military bases or secret prisons known as 'black sites'.

While rendition is a well-established, legally-sanctioned procedure for handing over individuals to another legal jurisdiction, extraordinary rendition is characterized by a deficiency in legal procedures, lack of accountability, intensive secrecy and allegations of severe mishandling, even torture, of detainees.

How did we end up with all of these ghost detainees?

The United States initially designed the extraordinary rendition program after 9/11 to quickly extract information from a handful of top-level terrorists or 'high value detainees'. In 2006 it acknowledged detaining fourteen Al Qaeda 'masterminds' in secret locations around the world (Karl, 2006). Several released individuals and human rights groups believe many more ghost prisoners are kept in Uzbekistan, Jordan, Egypt, Syria, Morocco and elsewhere.¹

The U.S. policy of designating all non-uniformed individuals captured in anti-terrorism operations as 'unlawful enemy combatants' has created a significant number of detainees of uncertain intelligence value. The claim is that such unlawful enemy combatants are not protected by the Geneva Convention or any other treaty regulating prisoner abuse. Military bases such as the infamous Guantánamo Bay are on foreign soil and therefore outside the jurisdiction of the U.S. legal system. Moreover, their remoteness substantially hampers media and activist scrutiny.

The flights

Since the 1960's the CIA has conducted secret operations on foreign soil with the help of passenger and cargo aircraft.² Using elaborate legal structures, it controls commercial airlines under layers of fictitious companies and forged ownership. The aircrafts are

used for an array of tasks ranging from food drop, ammunition refill to commando missions, kidnapping, personnel rescue, transport of civilians, spies and diplomats. The disguised charter flights transit in regular airports incognito, allowing the CIA to escape public scrutiny and ignore the laws of war.



Figure 2: Aircraft N313P of Premier Executive Transport Services. Nicknamed Guantánamo Express. © Toni Marimon

Planespotters first blew the whistle on rendition flights.³ Pictures of the unique identification number of each observed aircraft are posted on the web.⁴ Journalists have pieced together these time-stamped proofs with detainees accounts, anonymous official sources, incorporation papers and flight logs allowing them to retrace the aircraft ownership information to suspicious companies, and, ultimately, to the CIA's secret detention program.⁵



Figure 3: Anonymous Image sent to Mainstream News Organizations in 2002.⁶

Enhanced interrogation techniques

Ghost detainees in secret detention are questioned for potentially helpful intelligence in combating terrorism. Under the wartime rationale of imminent danger, ‘innovative questioning tactics are applied. The interrogation methods are based on Vietnam-era programs such as SERE (Survival Evasion Resistance Escape), which exposed American soldiers to simulated torture in hopes of inoculating them against such techniques.⁷ The same experts who devised these original programs now oversee the enhanced interrogation techniques (Benjamin, 2006). In 2005 CIA leaks confirmed these interrogation methods were designed and approved by the US administration (Dunlavey, 2002).⁸

What else are we losing when we make people disappear?

Renditions flights are surrounded by a constellation of painfully relevant issues such as the assault on the fundamental right to be innocent until proven guilty, doom-like

prophecies of a Clash of Civilizations between Muslim and Christian crusaders, and how to adequately deal with terrorist threats while preserving our values of tolerance, freedom and multiculturalism. Rendition flights are also one of the few situations where the network of black sites intersects with the rest of the unsuspecting world. This point of contact is civilian airports; they present an opportunity to address the elaborate extralegal system where people are mistreated in the name of our defense. Pearson airport is not directly involved in rendition flights. Nevertheless, it is a major node of the international civilian transport network in which rendition flights camouflage themselves. As such, Pearson airport provides a conducive, relevant context to disseminate information and facilitate a debate about rendition flights. Are black sites undermining the very principles that the war on terror aspires to protect?

INTERACTION

In this context, Maroussia Lévesque, Jason Lewis, Yannick Assogba and Raed Mousa, of the research studio Obx Labs created an interactive display about rendition flights to engage passengers at the Pearson airport. As discussed above, the dynamics at play in rendition and secret detention are opaque, changing and multifaceted. We designed the interaction with the goal of both conveying the complexity of the matter and allowing straightforward usability.⁹



Figure 4: Passage Oublié Touchscreen

Obx developed an interactive world map featuring airports involved in rendition flights. User-entered messages, along with messages gathered during informal interviews, are displayed on flight trajectories. There are three ways to interact with the project. One can look, touch, or contribute to the display.

look.

Map of involved airports

If one stands in front of the piece, he or she will see a world map with icons at the location of certain airports (Figure 5). These airports have earned a spot either because they serve as staging points for rendition operations or terror suspects were dropped off in a secret detention site nearby. Although some sources claim hundreds of locations are involved in rendition operations (Wachter & Jud, 2005),¹⁰ Passage Oublié's locations are restricted to those corroborated from three sources: a report from the European Commission (Marty, 2006), Amnesty International's records (Amnesty International, Below the Radar, 2006), as well as an online database of suspicious aircraft (Grey, 2006).



Figure 5: Rendition Airport Icons

The following airports and their codes appear on the *Passage Oublié* map.

- – Washington, USA (DCA)
- – Frankfurt, Germany (FRA)
- – Algiers, Algeria (ALG)
- – Amman, Jordan (AMM)
- – Baghdad, Iraq (SDA)
- – Cairo, Egypt (CAI)
- – Rabat, Morocco (RBA)
- – Kabul, Afghanistan (KBL)
- – Guantánamo Bay, Cuba (NBW)
- – Islamabad, Pakistan (ISB)
- – Tashkent, Uzbekistan (TAS)

The icons representing implicated airports provide a glimpse of the flight network transporting captured suspects. As black sites are constantly relocated, tracking each one accurately is next to impossible. Accordingly, *Passage Oublié* is about the global, fluid nature of the rendition flight network rather than spotlighting specific sites.

Flight paths

We recreated a visualization of flight trajectories between rendition staging airports and airports where people have been dropped off for interrogation. The map cycles between such 15 documented rendition flight trajectories leaving from either Washington or Frankfurt, and landing to one of the nine drop-off points (Figure 8).

Flight trajectories begin at staging airports. Staging airports are significant in two respects. They are convergence points where pilots and agents get briefed and embark the aircraft of a rendition operation. At the same time, a passenger at Pearson is only one flight away from two of these rendition launching pads: Washington and Frankfurt. *Passage Oublié* focuses on airports that simultaneously serve as rendition staging points and are one flight away from the site of the interactive kiosk to stress that rendition is closer to home than we would like to think.



Figure 6: Flight Paths Depart from Washington (Top) or Frankfurt (Bottom) According to Real-Time Flight Data

Real-time data determines which rendition flight trajectory is recreated. Comparing Toronto-Washington and Toronto-Frankfurt flights, *Passage Oublié* determines where messages take off. If the next flight leaves for Washington, then messages on our display will leave from the Washington airport icon. Inversely if the next flight leaves for Frankfurt, then messages will leave from the Frankfurt airport. Schedules of ‘innocent flights trigger rendition flight path visualizations to emphasize that rendition flights operate under the guise of regular passenger or cargo flights, carried on leased private jets that fill the same flight path requests and frequent the same airports we do.

Ultimately *Passage Oublié* is about the airport as a place of friction where free passengers and ghost detainees coexist, even if the former is unaware of the latter. Our primary means for bringing ghost prisoners to the attention of passengers are through

the flight trajectories. We focus on this element as rendition and regular flight plans present striking similitudes. This spatial commonality only underlines the stark gap between the rights and conditions of unsuspecting passengers and ghost prisoners.

Touch.

The flight paths featured in *Passage Oublié* depart and arrive from airports involved in rendition flights. The icons representing these airports are interactive: when a viewer in front of the display touches an airport icon, a pop-up appears. Each airport has a different pop-up featuring tailored content (Figure 9). The pop-up is separated in two segments; one is information about rendition and the other is messages sent by our users.



Figure 7: Touching an Icon Shows the Airport's Pop Up and Linkage.

Information

Every pop up has a fact section detailing how the specific airport causing it to appear is involved, and about the nearby black site. The data can be about the number of held prisoners, the 'enhanced interrogation techniques in effect, or the elements that brought public attention to this black site. It can also be the story of a specific ex-detainee, the reason he was captured, the length and condition of his detention as well as accounts from his captivity.

Messages

The pop up also functions as a repository for messages sent by our users. Received messages depart from Frankfurt or Washington—depending on real-time schedule—(Figure 8, Step 1), are animated along flight paths (Figure 8, Step 2) then land at a rendition drop-off airport (Figure 8, Step 3). The landing airport pop-up displays the message until the next message lands at another rendition drop-off point, or until a user touches a different airport icon.

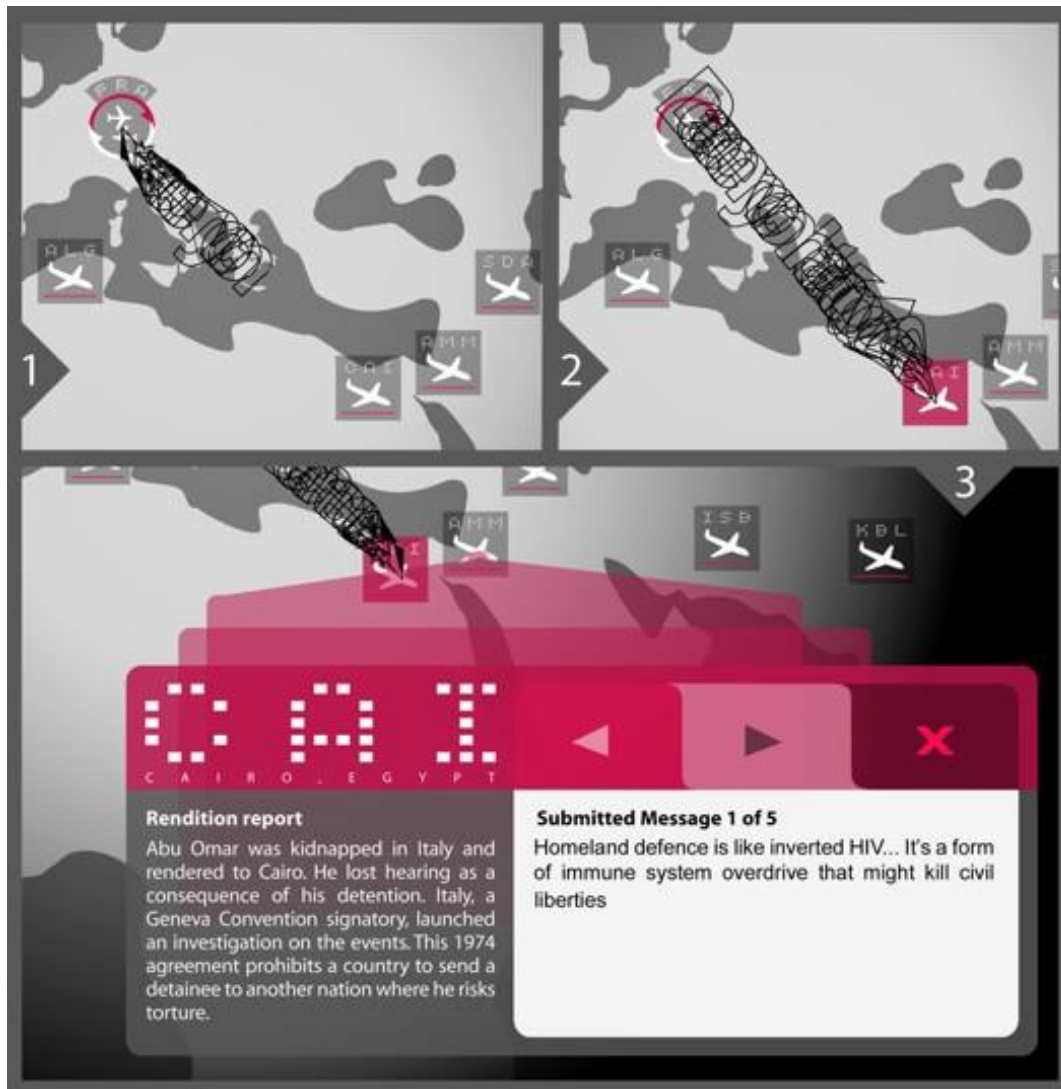


Figure 8: A User-Sent Message Animated Along Rendition Flight Path

Linkage

When a user touches an airport icon, bright lines show its connections to other rendition airports for a few seconds (Figure 9). Touching all icons rapidly will cause the whole network to be visible for a few moments. The visualization, like our ephemeral knowledge of shifting black site locations, is vanishing.



Figure 9: Touching All Icons Triggers A Full But Ephemeral Visualisation of the Rendition Flight Network

The people initially interested in unveiling the dynamics of rendition flights had to tackle a complex puzzle. Over the past six years, they have pulled together the following pieces:

- – the shell commercial aircraft companies involved
- – the link between these companies and the CIA
- – the foreign governments tacit collaboration in the form of participation to interrogation procedures and operational support (providing refueling stops for rendition aircraft, intelligence sharing about presumed terrorists)
- – the interaction between the military (holding unlawful enemy combatants) and intelligence entities (responsible for high value detainees and the secret detention program)
- – the interaction between foreign government officials and American intelligence agencies (black site hosting on foreign territory, granting explicit or tacit support for the removal of an individual from their country, etc.)

Similarly, the information in *Passage Oublié* is fragmented in pop ups and short-lived visualizations. The pop-ups, flight itineraries, rendition reports and user contributions all show a partial elements of the complex dynamics at play in the issue of rendition. It is up to the user to reconstruct a full picture of the rendition process by reading, touching or sending information to the *Passage Oublié* kiosk. This discontinuous narrative operates as a metaphor for the laborious process of discovering facts about rendition flights based on leaked information.

Contribute.

A third way of interacting with the piece is to contribute a message. The touch activated pop ups mentioned above function as repositories for user-entered messages. In this way the piece not only conveys information about the subject, but also serves as a forum of opinions, hence facilitating a public discussion about the issue.

We get the message

The project receives comments from the public on an ongoing basis. Text messages are collected from our webform (www.passageoublie.net) or mobile number (416.900.7669) (Figure 11). The appropriate and relevant messages are moderated and displayed in the interactive section of the pop up. Messages such as these are sent to the project and displayed at Pearson airport:

America has forgotten what it means to be free. They are the biggest terror state in the world.

Don't blow anything up.

Ask yourself whose “rendition flight” was worse – the terrorists’ who end up in Guantánamo, or the civilians’, who jumped out of windows to escape the collapsing World Trade Center.



Figure 10: Sending a Text Contribution to the Display Via Text Messaging

In comparison with messages gathered during in-person interviews described below, these messages tend to be more categorical. As more contributions are sent via text messaging and our webform, we are confident that we are facilitating public discussion on rendition flights and that this is a constructive step towards a sustained engagement of civil society in this matter.

Interviews

During the conception of the project, we conducted informal interviews in order to have some initial message material. In this phase, messages were captured in audio files, transcribed and edited. As few of the citizens we interviewed did not know anything about rendition flights, we chose instead to explore related issues such as Guantánamo Bay, habeas corpus¹¹ and the adage the end justifies the means. Here is a sample of some of the 200 answers gathered from our interviews.¹²

I don't think Guantánamo is the right way of doing it, but given the circumstances, they don't have the choice.

How can one say in the Western World that they apply the innocent-until-proven-guilty principle but then not give it to others?

These are people who have been legitimately captured in situations of war and are waiting procedure in due diligence.

Rendition flights are not just; if a particular country suspects someone, there is no reason why he/she should be taken to another country of his origin or otherwise.

We'd like things to be black and white but they are not that simple.

In situ

We conducted some of these interviews at Pearson airport in waiting areas near boarding gates, under the constant supervision of an assigned security guard. Despite the strongly regulated nature of the space—all passengers had just conceded their dignity and freedom to the increasingly invasive measures en vogue at the customs— we found vocal critics and supporters of anti-terror regulations. The most frequent comment was that anti-terror procedures were a grey area and that this was a foreign issue—an American issue—that did not concern Canadians.



Figure 11: Performing Interviews at Dundas Square, Toronto

Take it to the streets

While the airport politically-neutral and highly surveilled context dictated a journalistic-like approach, interviews in Toronto's downtown Dundas Square were political from the outset. We approached potential interviewees in a prisoner jumpsuit similar to that used during rendition flights. Since the orange jumpsuit percolated in popular culture as the symbol for American prisoner abuse,¹³ interviewees with mitigated or pro-detention views were rather resistant. By taking such a clear stance on the topic of extraordinary renditions, we also provoked more radical messages and attracted significant attention both from the public and the authorities.

The performative interviews were instrumental towards understanding how to best position *Passage Oublié* as a well-informed, credible piece triggering contributions for a wide array of political perspectives. The neutral questions and presentation at Pearson airport were much more conducive to candid contributions. For that reason, the piece is informative rather than militant, hoping to circumvent a larger area of the population otherwise turned off by an openly radical approach. In that sense, *Passage Oublié* is an undercover radical agent in a neutral setting. If renditions can camouflage themselves in airports, so can we.

CARTOGRAPHY OF NOWHERE

For ghost prisoners anywhere becomes nowhere. Forced disappearances into black sites constitute a denial of reasonable expectations concerning fairness, human rights or even prisoner rights. This global mistreatment network takes people off the radar, off the record, off the map. Regular passengers and rendered prisoners transit through the same airports, but are subjected to different rules. Passage Oublié was installed at Pearson airport because as with many nodes of international air traffic, it is only one flight away from some airports involved in rendition flights. Pertinently enough, the airport is named after Canadian Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson, known as the pioneer of peacekeeping as well as a key advocate of consensual international conflict resolution. Passage Oublié is intensely site-specific, as it sits in one of the nodes of the international travel network providing the structure and coverage for the secret operations of the extraordinary rendition program. As we ourselves transit through the same network, we should all wonder what is going on behind that unmarked door, on that distant runway, inside that unmarked plane.

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Acknowledgments

Passage Oublié was produced at Obx Labs by Maroussia Lévesque, Jason Lewis, Yannick Assogba and Raed Mousa, with support from Hexagram and Concordia University. For more information visit www.passageoublie.net

We thank Michael Alstad and Jhave Johnston from Year 01, Lee Peetrie and Ozgur Erkucuk from the Greater Toronto Area Airports, Orlando Saez from Boingo, all the guinea pigs who tested the interaction, the interviewees at Pearson airport and Dundas Square and the individuals sending text messages to the project.

Notes

1. In June 2007, five leading human rights groups disclosed the names of 39 people believed to be ghost detainees. (Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Cageprisoners et al., 2007)
2. The CIA’s first shell company was Air America. It was used in the Vietnam war. (Robbins, 1988)
3. For the purposes of simplicity we will now refer to ‘extraordinary rendition’ as ‘rendition’.
4. These hobbyists monitor airplanes’ movements and radio communications near airports. Figure 2 is one of the first tangible proofs of the involvement of private jets. Toni Marimon posted it on a website dedicated to the amateur planespotter community.
5. Based on publicly available flight logs and ownership information from aviation agency, Aero, Pegasus, Tepper, Premier Executive Transport Services, Crowell Aviation Technologies, Stevens Express Leasing seem to be CIA-operated shell companies. Flawed strategies that gave away the real ownership include individuals owning more than one company, whose social security number was issued 43 years after birth. Another clue was that all ownership information pointed to a lawyer’s office in Washington. (Paglen, Torture Taxi, 2006)
6. In November 2002 pictures depicting prisoners in military custody on board of American military planes were sent to radio show host Art Bell. Air Force and U.S. Central Command investigated the leak, and confirmed the pictures were taken in a c-130 transport ship. This seems to be a case of ‘unlawful enemy combatants’ transferred to Guantánamo Bay by the military police. It differs from extraordinary rendition flights in that military, not CIA agents control the military, not commercial aircraft. However,

we can observe similar conditions: the individual is strapped in an uncomfortable position, shackled and blinded. The position of the prisoner and soldier in the foreground suggests intimidation in the form of shouting or hitting. (CBS, 2002)

7. The Gestapo first coined the terms *verschärfte vernehmung* (enhanced interrogation techniques) to describe coercion of Nazi resistance. (Horton, 2007)

8. Public outrage concerning mistreatment allegations and the harshness of the methods forced the government to officially remove its approval of some enhanced interrogation techniques. There is an ongoing debate about the legality of these methods and the eligibility of confessions obtained under such treatment. Part of the problem with rendition is the difficulty to rehabilitate the individual in the legal system. The individual may be exonerated because ghost prisoners forced confessions are not admissible under many jurisdictions. What's more, releasing a ghost prisoner may expose his captors to legal charges. Those are strong incentives to keep the person indefinitely detained. In 2002 the US administration issued a memo concluding that torture was restricted to organ failure, long lasting pain or severe mental trauma over a sustained period of time. Within this interpretation, the US had a "significant range of acts that though they might constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment fail to rise to the level of torture". (Bybee, 2002, p. 46)

9. During prototyping we conducted an informal user test to reality check our design. Obx Labs is committed to exploring new user interface strategies that actually work.

10. Zone Interdite in an online database where users can contribute and add information regarding rendition flights. A map features rendition trajectories, and a list of suspect aircraft and airline companies is available.

11. Habeas Corpus is the principle of innocent until proven guilty. It dates back to 1305 and is a cornerstone of Western legal systems. More information available here.

12. Full transcripts are available here, under the "message list" header in the archive section.

13. Amnesty International organizes protests and campaigns where participants wear the orange jumpsuit as the symbol of protest against human rights infringements. Their website specifically mentions: "Use colours and props associated with Guantánamo Bay, rent and wear inexpensive versions of orange jumpsuits."

This strategy was applied in local chapters of Amnesty International worldwide, and has drawn media attention accordingly: BBC, Indymedia, CBC, Turkish Press.