

# PSYOP in Action

by **M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP**  
**Professor of Computer Information Systems**  
**Norwich University, Northfield VT**

PSYOP is the abbreviation for “psychological operations,” a part of information warfare that includes both distribution of accurate information and propaganda campaigns with lies and distortions.< <http://www.psywar.org/> >

I received a series of horrific images from a well-meaning colleague recently that can be qualified as PSYOP. They showed “An 8 year old child caught stealing bread in a market of Iran is punished in a public place, in the name of Islam!!!” The e-mail message went on, “His arm will be crushed and will lose its use permanently. A religion of peace and love, they say? How can anyone believe them when they commit such inhuman acts?” The six pictures showed a tiny boy grimacing as his arm was run over by a vehicle.

Appalling! I prepared to send the pictures on to family and friends interested in the Middle East.

However, as I always do before forwarding anything, I checked the Urban Myths Reference Pages at Snopes.com. < <http://www.snopes.com/> > The photographer’s name was printed on each of the photos: Siamak Yari. Using that name in the search box on the Snopes home page instantly pointed to this entry: “Bread and Media Circuses.” < <http://www.snopes.com/photos/gruesome/crushboy.asp> > All six of the pictures were on the Web site.

Status? “Real photos; inaccurate description.”

The entry reads as follows:

>The above-displayed photographs have been circulating on the Internet since at least 2004, usually in e-mail forwards that set them in one of several Arab/Muslim areas (e.g., Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Palestinian territories) and claim that the boy pictured is being punished under a harsh sharia law system that imposes a penalty grossly out of proportion to the nature of the crime (i.e., having his arm crushed under a vehicle because he stole a loaf of bread).

What the photographs actually depict (according to the operator of the site that originally published them) is performers hustling money from onlookers by staging an act, one in which a subject seemingly allows himself to be run over by a heavy vehicle and then emerges unscathed. (Note the man with the microphone in the first picture, who drums up business and describes the action for observers. Also note the blanket placed under the boy's arm — not a consideration persons intent on severely punishing a lawbreaker would be likely to provide.) This a common illusion, variations of which are performed by many magicians and accomplished through a variety of means, with no lasting harm done. That the subject is a small boy who grimaces his way through the stunt is all part of the act, intended to elicit sympathy and extra cash — despite his contorted facial expressions, the boy is not seriously hurt.<

The entry concludes with a final piece of debunking: “The versions of these photographs circulated via e-mail generally leave out the last pictures of the original series, which show the same boy after the conclusion of the stunt: <

[http://graphics1.snopes.com/photos/gruesome/graphics/bread7\\_small.jpg](http://graphics1.snopes.com/photos/gruesome/graphics/bread7_small.jpg) >.”

In researching this article, I also ran across a Web site in which the pictures were used as the basis of attacks on Islam; all attempts to argue that the situation was different from the initial claims were met with torrents of obscene language, denial that the Snopes explanation could possibly be correct, and repeated urgings to slaughter all Muslims. You will understand that I forbear to give you the URL.

The use of a child as a prop in a trick to persuade people to donate money is child abuse and may even qualify as slavery if the child is kept in bondage. However, child abuse is unfortunately found in many cultures around the world especially where poverty is common < <http://www.antislavery.org/homepage/antislavery/childlabour.htm> > – and also in developed countries such as the USA. < <http://childmolestationprevention.org/> >

Don't let this kind of lie color your perceptions of an entire country, an entire culture and millions of people. Check the facts – especially if you are blowing up in outrage. As a Jew who lost family in the Holocaust, I have no intention of sitting quietly to watch yet another people demonized and dehumanized using propaganda techniques successfully implemented by the Nazis.

Teach all your employees, colleagues, friends and family that it is irresponsible to forward e-mail messages – especially those that are defamatory or incendiary – without checking their veracity first.

\* \* \*

New information assurance journal – Norwich University Journal of Information Assurance (NUJIA). See < <http://nujia.norwich.edu> >.

M. E. Kabay, PhD, CISSP-ISSMP is Program Director of the Master of Science in Information Assurance < <http://www.msia.norwich.edu> > at Norwich University in Northfield, VT. Mich can be reached by e-mail at < <mailto:mekabay@gmail.com> >; Web site at < <http://www2.norwich.edu/mkabay/index.htm> >.

Copyright © 2006 M. E. Kabay. All rights reserved.

Permission is hereby granted to *Network World* to distribute this article at will, to post it without limit on any Web site, and to republish it in any way they see fit.