

Democracy as Dialogue: How the Media Influence Canadian Democracy

BY DANIELLE DEVEREAUX

“To respect the limits of discourse is to avoid the authoritarian claim that ‘we got it right’; it is to keep different forms of conversation going, to preserve the lack of closure that democracy requires.” CATRIONA SANDILANDS, THE GOOD-NATURED FEMINIST

Since the US invaded Iraq on March 19, 2003, almost 800 US soldiers have died. According to the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, 82% have died since May 2, 2003; the day after US President George Bush announced that the war was over. On March 14, 2004, almost a year after the US-led invasion of Iraq began, a group of anti-war protesters gathered outside the Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. Who are these peaceniks? Many are relatives of soldiers who have been killed in the Iraq war, others have sons, daughters or partners serving in Iraq and they want their loved ones brought home – alive. According to Agence France-Presse, the Dover Air Force Base houses the US military’s largest mortuary; this is where young men and women come home in body bags.

The US government claimed an invasion of Iraq was necessary because Saddam Hussein and his weapons of mass destruction were a threat to the American people. They have captured Hussein, but they have yet to find weapons of mass destruction, other than the ones the US military relies on. “Bush lies and who dies?” asked Fernando Suarez del Solar in an interview with Agence France Presse at the March 14th rally. “My son, Jesus Suarez del Solar Navarro” – killed in Iraq, March 27, 2003.

In a statement released March 11, the main organizers of the protest at Dover, *Military Families Speak Out*, said their march was “a Memorial Procession for Mourning and Truth to pull back the veil, honour and mourn the dead and acknowledge the wounded – both US military personnel and the tens of thousands of Iraqi casualties.” They called on the Bush administration to “start telling the truth, [and] stop hiding the toll.”

Is the Bush administration hiding its war dead? Historically, honouring a country’s fallen soldiers has been seen as an opportunity to rally patriotism. Patriotically speaking, the solemn grandeur of military ceremonies carries a lot of weight. Yet in the October 21, 2003 edition of the *Washington Post*, Dana Milbank reported on a directive handed down by the US government stating, “There will be no arrival ceremonies for, or media coverage of, deceased military personnel returning to or departing from Ramstein [Germany] airbase or Dover [Del.] base, to include interim stops”. This media ban was ordered the same day the US invaded Iraq.

This is an invasion Canada did not support. Canadian troops are not

serving in the Iraq war; what then, does a protest in Delaware have to do with the media's influence on Canadian democracy? Canadian soldiers may not be in Iraq, but they are dying. Compare the media ban prohibiting the filming of caskets coming off military planes in the US, to Canada's media coverage of Canadian soldiers killed on peacekeeping missions in Afghanistan; the "no arrival ceremonies" homecoming of Marine Lance Corporal Jesus Suarez del Solar Navarro, to the honour guard that stood waiting on the tarmac for the homecoming of Corporal Jamie Murphy.

A suicide bomber killed Corporal Jamie Murphy, a young man from Conception Harbour, Newfoundland, on January 27, 2004. The media coverage of this tragedy, on a national and local level, was extensive. Our media did not shut off the cameras as his remains were returned to Canadian soil. News of his death and life were everywhere – from national newspapers, television and radio stations, to community and university media outlets. Does this mean that as a country we treat our fallen soldiers with greater respect? I'm not sure, but I am certain that the difference between Jamie Murphy's homecoming and Jesus Suarez del Solar Navarro's homecoming, does have something to do with democracy.

Glenn Deir interviewed Jamie Murphy's family for CBC Television's evening newscast *Canada Now*. The interview is extremely difficult to watch. Partway through a broken Norman Murphy, Jamie's father, leaves. As the interview continues, Jamie's sisters and mother remember Jamie as a loving, wonderful young man; they also question whether or not Canadian troops should be in Afghanistan. Jamie's mother, Alice Murphy, tells Deir, "They shouldn't be over there. I always said they shouldn't be over there." Norma Murphy, Jamie's sister, asks, "What's the sense of it? ...As long as they're over there they're going to be dying...he won't be the last one."

This question – what is the sense of it? – was further debated in the media, at least in Newfoundland and Labrador, when residents of the province were invited to call in to a special CBC Radio open line show to talk about Jamie's death and the Murphy family's television interview.

Should Canada be in Afghanistan? I'm not sure. The media plays an important role for Canadian democracy not because it can answer this question, but because it can facilitate the debate. There is a media ban on US military bases for a reason. Flag-draped caskets invite questions, conversations and debate. Debates are dangerous, they bring with them

possibility – the possibility that the American public may well decide, as many already have, that the US should not be in Iraq; that Canadians may well decide that Canada should not be in Afghanistan.

BOTH SIDES OF THE STORY – OBJECTIVE JOURNALISM?

Media counts; it is also produced. To claim that any media is objective yes – even Canadian media – is problematic. The camera is turned on some stories, not on others. Even attempts to show ‘both sides of the story’ are impossible – when are there ever only two sides to a story? Jamie Murphy loved his work but looked forward to coming home, his family were proud of him but do not think he should have been in Afghanistan, Jamie’s death was the doing of a suicide bomber who clearly did not want Canadian Peacekeepers in the country, yet many Afghans do want Canadian Peacekeepers in their country and wish help had arrived years ago.

And even as we get to know and mourn Jamie Murphy the son, brother, friend and lover, even as we glimpse the many complex sides that come with his story, we know nothing, not even the name, of the Afghan civilian who died in the same blast that killed Jamie. Mention of his or her death disappears after the first few reports. In the weeks that followed Jamie Murphy’s death, everywhere I went people were talking about him, his family, their grief, the Canadian Peacekeeping Mission in Afghanistan. What we see and hear in the media shapes and frames what we think and talk about; what we do not see or hear is just as important. Consider the following example: according to DATA, an organization working to eliminate debt, AIDS and unfair trade practices in Africa, 6,500 people die of AIDS in Africa every day. Imagine if every night, every newscaster across the world sat down and said, “And today 6,500 men, women and children died of AIDS in Africa... And again today 6,500 people died of AIDS in Africa... And again today...” How would our conversations change? How would our world change?

ALL NEWS ALL THE TIME?

Of course the news is not our only media source and despite the availability of ‘all news all the time’ channels, the news actually forms a small part of the media we consume. Advertising, sitcoms, reality TV, cartoons, music, movies, video games, fashion magazines, the Internet – the media has become our society’s main storyteller, at least in North America. In *Advertising and the End of the World*, cultural theorist Sut Jhally defines culture

“as the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.” These stories shape the way we behave, our values, our desires, even our identities; as storyteller, the media plays a powerful social role.

What stories do our media systems tell? When tied to commercial profit and corporate power, dissenting voices are jeopardized. Consider the television programme *Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman*, cancelled in 1998, not because of low viewer numbers, it was actually number one in its timeslot, but because its fans – older, rural viewers – were not the kind of audience that attract advertisers (Kilbourne 35). Now this is not problematic because *Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman* is a great show, maybe it is, maybe it isn't, but because while a media ban like the one imposed by US President George Bush is quite visible – obviously the government is censoring the media here – corporate pressures of the type that pulled *Dr. Quinn* off the air often go unnoticed.

Many of us are under the impression that the programmes we watch are on television because these are the kinds of programmes we want to watch. *Dr. Quinn* illustrates that this is not always the case. Yes we have hundreds of channels, but how much choice do we really have when the types of shows we view are dictated by advertising and corporate desires? As a television programme, *Dr. Quinn* is an example of a dissenting voice, dissenting because it did not, or perhaps could not, perpetuate the kind of consumer culture advertisers rely on.

It is important to recognize the role this consumer culture plays in our society. When our media systems rely on advertising for survival, as most of them do, the stories they tell are often limited to stories that speak to us as consumers, not as citizens. As consumers, our only obligation is to participate in the market economy; participation in society is irrelevant. Societal problems – world affairs, the environment, poverty, war – are not our problems. But this is not true. War in Iraq, life and death in Afghanistan – even when we are safe in our homes on the island of Newfoundland, they are our stories.

MEDIA AS DIALOGUE

Shortly after the CBC Television interview with Corporal Murphy's family aired, the local CBC Radio station in St. John's interviewed an Afghan Newfoundlander. Ajmal Pashtoonyar gently disagreed with Norma Murphy's assertion that Afghans do not want Canadians in their country. Pashtoonyar was adamant that Afghans do want and need

Canadian Peacekeepers in their war-torn country; that indeed the Afghani people had wanted and needed help for years, and were grateful that it had finally arrived. When asked if he had a message for Corporal Murphy's family, the young man grieved for Jamie, and assured the Murphy family that his death was not in vain. I think this 'conversation' between Norma Murphy and Ajmal Pashtoonyar is an example of what the media's influence on Canadian democracy can be. Do I think Canadian Peacekeepers should be in Afghanistan? Maybe. Yes or no, my answer is not what is most important here, what is most important is that I am invited to think about it.

Whether we are talking about the tragic stories of Corporal Jamie Murphy, his family, and the place of Canadian Peacekeepers in Afghanistan, or simply the fictional stories created around programmes like *Dr. Quinn Medicine Woman*, as storyteller the media spends a lot of time talking to us. If our media systems are to contribute to Canadian democracy, it is essential that we be allowed to talk, or at least think back. Thinking back, talking back, conversing, makes us, as part of the audience, part of the storytelling – and that's a pretty good description of democracy.

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Please note: References for the CBC St. John's Radio interview with Ajmal Pashtoonyar and the CBC Radio open line call in show regarding Jamie Murphy's death were unavailable.