

Conference 2003: Press Freedom

Journalism After September 11

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The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington were alleged at the time to have 'changed the world forever.' This statement has taken on the aura of received wisdom in the two years since the attacks.

The days immediately after the attacks have also been described as "journalism's finest hour." Given the mainstream news media's signal failure to answer the key questions "Why do they hate us so much?" we might conclude that what we have actually seen is a fetishisation of reportage. We knew a lot about the how and what and where without much at all about the why. In fact only Oprah Winfrey posed the key contextual question. Where was everyone else?

There has been a total failure to contextualise America's position in the world and how it is seen by other peoples and nations. Hence we see a continuation of a significant trend; the decline in world news coverage by the corporatised United States news media. There is a great irony that news media are contributing to a situation where the American news-consuming public actually knows and understands less about the world scene while its government and corporations involve themselves more.

If "the world has changed forever" what is the impact on journalism in Western liberal democracies in general and the United States in particular? If we look at the situation prior to September 11 the role and status of the news media largely revolved around its critical place in supporting the citizenry in its need to be informed. This informed electorate then would be better able to carry out its democratic duties as defined by the United States' Constitution and the Westminster system and its Commonwealth variants. Sparks (cited in Dahlgren & Sparks 1991, p.58) writes that "this is by far the most important (role), and it is with reference to this function that the press is praised or criticized."

Putting aside for the moment the developing academic debates about media ownership, globalisation, media imperialism and the "essentially ideological" nature of the journalistic narrative (McNair 1998, p.6) we may assume that there is an important persuasive and informing role for the news media. Following Entman (1989 p.75) we may also assert "media messages significantly influence what the public and elites think, by affecting what they perceive and think about."

One of the issues identified here and elsewhere is the implied question of what the public *doesn't* think about. The demonisation and/or exclusion of opposing or alternative viewpoints on significant public issues is a growing feature of corporatised news particularly but not exclusively in the Murdoch media.

As Boyd-Barrett (2003) notes "there are two obvious frames for reporting the (Iraq) war. 1.) an illegal war, contrary to international law, contrary to United Nations. Iraq is no real threat. or 2.) Iraq constituted a significant threat to the United States and other countries. Iraq harboured weapons of mass destruction."

"All 6 US networks adopted this second frame. There was no dissent." The critical journalistic value of balance was ignored.

Proposed law changes in New Zealand and Canada, new homeland security measures in the United States as well as media boycotts of perceived opponents of whatever current 'war' is being pitched by White House and Pentagon (Downing Street or Canberra) are all part of media, political and public responses to news about the 'war' (on terror, the Taliban, Saddam, drugs) as framed by news media culture.

Conservative columnist John Nichols (2003) writing in *The Nation* argues "Attorney-General John Ashcroft is treating the Constitution like it was a threat to America."

The 'us versus them' framing of news stories certainly excludes varied and layered interpretations and supports George W. Bush' exclamation that "if you not with us you are against us". Thereby France,

Germany, Canada, New Zealand and other 'friends' in the 'war on terror' are thus 'not friends' in the war in Iraq. So may any news outlet quoting opposing or interpretive views.

Dr Wayne Hope (2002) writes "the official discourse constructs outsider groups in gradations of deviance." This official discourse was most reflected in US media in the time of September 11 and the Iraq war. See also Blackman & Walkerdine, (2001) p.10)

The media culture which created this situation also includes journalistic work practices which select and celebrate conflict as well as media owners' attitudes to market share or even dominance.

The relentless 'nowness' of the news media, particularly television, militates against understanding by not allowing for the public to develop a sense of context for major news stories.

Boyd-Barrett (2003) refers to "total spectrum dominance" and a "shocking degree of homogeneity of response to both September 11 and the Iraq war." He asks "Is the propaganda model of Herman and Chomsky enough to explain this?"

The Independent's Andrew Gumbel (in NZ Herald, 17 April, 2003 p.A18) recently reported Rupert Murdoch's "cable news channel, Fox News, came out of the Iraq war stronger than ever." This situation resulted in an altered news media landscape in which the 3 main networks saw their audiences decline in wartime while viewers turned to Fox cable. According to Gumbel "the true-blue patriotism and liberal-baiting putdowns of Fox News are the future." With a future like this democracy and democratic political life will continue to be constricted."

A conservative White House and a corporate- friendly Federal Communication Commission have decided to reward Murdoch with further deregulation of media cross-ownership regulations.

This is not over yet in Washington but the FCC has given at least its tentative blessing to the idea.

Similar legislation is proposed in Australia where the government also faces determined opposition to relaxed foreign ownership and cross-media ownership regulations.

McQuail (1991, p.20), perhaps foreseeing this altered situation, asserted over a decade ago "the claim to press freedom is made irrespective of whether the freedom is used for conformist or critical ends." He also writes that the "broadcast media have been much more tightly controlled and even less inclined to non-conformity." Oligopolistic ownership patterns and an entertainment before information ethic also helps explain this phenomenon.

It is perhaps ironic that Murdoch may be perceived as preserving, promoting and protecting press freedom. In a deregulated, neo-liberal economic discourse this may be what press freedom has come to mean.

A journalistic culture seeking the clash of opposites as most worthy of coverage is sheltered by a political culture which protects press freedom from direct governmental interference. A key issue for press freedom then becomes the extent to which corporatised media reflect elite interests in concert with corporatised government also reflecting elite interests. Where is the press freedom for all the various non-elite interests? Can the internet and PBS be enough?

When we examine the responses and the claims of press freedom together we find a disappointing, even threatening, pattern emerges.

As Cohen-Almagor (2001, p.xv) argues "democracy, in its liberal form, is no exception (to the) contention that the very principles that underlie the system might bring about its destruction." He lists what he calls "the positive mechanisms of liberty, tolerance, participation and representation" (p.xv) as key components.

These mechanisms actually allow news media to generate anti-democratic responses in media and in the public at large. The Murdoch example cited above would certainly sustain this point of view.

What has happened since September 11, 2001 to confirm this as a serious development? The recent so-called 'war' in Iraq also provided numerous examples.

A leading member of a Texas singing group suggested while overseas they were ashamed President Bush shared the same home state.

"The Dixie Chicks, who had been riding the top of the charts with their album *Home* after winning Grammy awards in February, found themselves the subject of radio boycotts and public CD burnings." (St John 2003, p. B4) A wit suggested they should be more the 'French Hens' than the Dixie Chicks.

This is all very reminiscent of an American theme. John Lennon's throwaway line about the Beatles being more popular than Jesus and the attendant album destruction led by DJs and ministers of religion in the mid-1960s is part of a similar development. Some such responses are calculated no doubt for personal exposure and advantage, other later responses tend toward the hysterical. In a vicious circle, hysterical responses becomes news.

The Screen Actors Guild has let it be known "that members with "unacceptable" views (such as Martin Sheen, the 'President' on television's *The West Wing*), might be punished by losing their right to work." (Dixon 2003, p.B6) Sheen's 'crime' was to have led a march against the (then) upcoming Iraq war. This, darkly, reminds us of the McCarthy witch hunts of the Cold War era.

The New York Times, in a recent editorial, summarised McCarthy's role in American history as a "poisonous encounter" and went on to note "that "Congress's release of some of the more odious McCarthy archives (is) a welcome renewal of cautionary history." (NY Times cited in (NZ) Sunday Star-Times, May 11, 2002, p.C2) There is still resistance to restricted access to history. While the high end media alerts us to the dangers the low rent media struggle with the concept of open and inclusive democracy and reflect the commercial and attendant political interests of the owners. Who, we may ask, will report this release of files and its implications for US democracy to the greater masses watching television news?

NBC and Fox stumbled in their news coverage of Iraq but for quite different reasons. Peter Arnett, a faded star of the first Gulf War, was dumped by MSNBC.

He talked on the record to Iraqi state television about how "his reports about civilian casualties and the resistance of Iraqi forces helped the antiwar movement in the United States." (Stanley 2003, p.A16) NBC quickly caved in to a perception that somehow Arnett was helping Iraqi resistance rather than doing his job as a journalist, informing people and staying on the job while others had left. The corporate mentality did not allow for any risk-taking particularly in an era of declining audiences and sideline cheerleading for the US-led coalition's forces.

Geraldo Rivera of Fox News was, if anything, overly gung-ho and actually gave away US troop positions to anyone who was watching. He was too embarrassing as a correspondent for even the hysterical Fox News.

All this is in some ways a preamble to the state of our thinking about September 11. If we were to take it as read that "the world has changed forever" then the current situation of the War on Terror, the Second Gulf War and the increasingly illiberal political landscape of the West must flow back to that day of spectacular shock and pain.

As mentioned above some polities such as Canada (immigration policy and border controls) and New Zealand (police & spy agency surveillance powers) have been accused of giving in to US pressure to put illiberal laws on their statute books in response to the terrorist threat.

The United States government, courts and judicial authorities are now routinely accused by liberal organs such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of trampling citizens' First Amendment rights in response to September 11 and its aftermath. One Supreme Court justice referred to "the culture war" in an opinion. This "war" is being exported to the world by corporate media as well as US diplomatic and military power.

The First Amendment Center's executive director Ken Paulson announced, "The results of our 2002 survey suggest that many Americans view these fundamental freedoms as possible obstacles in the war on terrorism."(http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/sofa_reports/index.aspx)

Is this confirmation that Cohen- Almagor's contention deserves further attention? Do the media truly have a role to play in this undermining of the very principles which give them their role in a democratic society? We therefore return to the issue of polities in which mass media are overwhelmingly or exclusively corporate. Press freedom has come to mean corporate freedom undervaluing the traditional meaning of the term.

Freedom to support illiberal, anti-democratic and interventionist foreign policy, it could be argued, is no freedom at all. Least of all for the increasing proportion of the readership/viewership who are offered no substantial alternative information or opinions. To be fair it could be argued that mature democratic polities such as the United States and the United Kingdom have a greater capacity for resistance to corporate economic power than many left-liberal commentators may at first allow.

Despite apparent growing corporate influence, accelerating media mergers and acquisitions and neo-liberal friendly governments there is a depth to the news culture developed over two centuries which cannot be completely overturned or ignored in a half generation. This news culture has also been absorbed by a significant media aware segment of the population.

Many news people understand their role is to oppose to the powers-that-be. Even after thirty years Watergate resonates with news media people throughout Western media culture. Professional news-gatherers understand that no matter how much they might find out about Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton to feed the prurience of readers there are other issues critical to a healthy democracy.

The world has not changed forever; that is an American-centred conceit. The corporate global media and its supporters in the United States governments will continue, as before September 11, to press their views in public forums and private meetings.

There is a great capacity for resistance to corporate media and neo-liberal economic policies among the population both inside and outside the United States. Americans are wedded to their First Amendment rights.

The Democrats and a declining US economy may force a re-examination of current policy.

The British have a tradition of strong liberal media institutions such as the Guardian and the BBC. It is not all Sun, Mirror and News of the World even if tabloid values have become more prevalent in the last two decades. Both countries feature media who can catch a whiff of lies and distortions in an instant and have a tradition of chasing them down.

America and Britain have friends like New Zealand and Canada who have a serious public and governmental commitment to collective security and international institutions. They cannot see the world through American eyes even when they sympathise as they did just after September 11.

Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood recently wrote an article intended for a US audience entitled "We don't know you anymore." The rightward drift of American life was also reflected earlier this year in a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation study of two small university cities on each side of the border. The Americans focus on family, community and local interests while Canadians were more concerned by world events and trends such as the world environment. The September 11 sympathy factor has been largely dissipated outside of the United States even in states like Australia and Great Britain who needed determined governments to support US in the Iraq conflict.

We are left with a Western media landscape in many ways similar to that which existed prior to September 11. As Winseck (p.71) notes diversity in media coverage is more a myth than a reality. The links between big government and big media corporations continue to be forged at a continuing cost to democratic values and practices. The re-establishment of the military at the core of American life has been hastened by what Carruthers (2000) calls "forging the bonds of sentiment" through the media in wartime.

The challenges for those who value the news media's role in liberal democracies remain similar as well. News needs to inform the public. News must provide context for understanding of current policy and practices. News cannot be allowed to be corporatised to the extent that it is simply a bottom line product like any other. An assertive democratic life is a better defence against terrorism than any amount of hysterical baiting of the 'other'.

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