

Context and Ideology in the Canadian Media

BY JEAN COLÉNO

“People don’t actually read newspapers,” Marshall McLuhan famously said. “They get into them every morning, like a hot bath.” McLuhan’s quip was meant to apply only to newspapers, but it unfortunately holds true for most of the Canadian media. Too often, our media affect us like a cozy, stupefying bath, when they should jolt us like a cold, invigorating shower.

A healthy democracy needs knowledgeable, curious, and critically minded citizens. In at least two respects, the Canadian media fail in their duty to foster these qualities of good citizenship: first, the media tend to present news without proper historical and social context, making it difficult for citizens to evaluate events in an informed manner; and second, the media allow political debate to be monopolized by ideologues who adhere dogmatically to their respective political catechisms. These problems are more closely related than they appear and can best be overcome in tandem.

Last autumn, a major civil war broke out in the Ivory Coast. Knowing little about this small country, I scoured Canada’s “quality” press to learn about the background from which the conflict emerged. For several weeks, I expected to come across a media piece on the conditions that gave birth to this tragedy. I waited in vain; if any major Canadian media outlet presented a thoughtful report on the background to this civil war, it somehow escaped the notice of this media junkie. I did eventually find what I was looking for, but I had to look beyond the Canadian media.

Newsworthy stories tend to involve bad or tragic events. With the possible exception of freak accidents, such events cannot be understood outside of their historical, social, or economic circumstances. When violent events such as civil wars are presented without context, their perpetrators come across as Charles Mansons, demented and wicked brutes inexplicably bent on spreading havoc. Of course, a few such people exist, but even they do not pop up out of nowhere and are best understood by examining the environment in which they grew.

On certain sorts of international questions, the Canadian media do a better job of supplying context than they did a few years ago.

Since September 11th, the press has made a laudable effort to situate events in the Middle East within a broader historical and social context. Anyone with even a trace of curiosity now knows far more about the history of Islam and about the various interests and forces at play in the Middle East than he or she did on September 10th, 2001.

Still, there remains much room for improvement. Consider the question of the legality or illegality of the war waged by the United States and its military allies against Iraq. As of late March of this year, I have come across dozens of claims in the Canadian media that this war is illegal, and dozens of counterclaims that the war is, on the contrary, perfectly legal, but I have not come across a single serious piece attempting to weigh the evidence for and against each of these positions.² By failing to address a question of such magnitude, the media make it easy for Canadians to spout off on this subject according to their preconceived biases; in fact, the media positively encourage this sort of empty political bluster by airing the views of ideologues who can be counted on to follow their respective party lines on every given issue.

This brings me to my second main concern: media debate is dominated by dogmatists of the left, right, and centre. Far too many of our media commentators approach political issues by reflexively consulting their musty political catechisms. Give me a typical pundit's views on, say, abortion and government-subsidized housing, and I can guess with a high degree of accuracy his or her views on tax cuts, capital punishment, and war with Iraq. Needless to say, such conformists seldom merit one's attention except as case studies in herd mentality.

Thankfully, there are public commentators who try to approach politics with a questioning mind, but these are the rare exceptions. Our public "thinkers" are usually content to occupy a square on the ideological chessboard from which they launch rhetorical assaults on their political opponents. In the worst cases, these media figures are mere mascots skilled at waving flashy ideological banners to the cheers of their rabid fans. Such pundits do not even bother trying to persuade skeptics through reasoned arguments, for that is simply not what mascots are paid to do.

It is easy to point to shameless ideological mascots whose views we disagree with, but if we are honest with ourselves, we will admit

to having sometimes cheered mascots on our side of the political field. Such pundits flourish across the ideological spectrum: they specialize in shouting catchy slogans, spewing moral indignation, casting doubt on the intentions and intelligence of their opponents, and staging cheap publicity stunts.

I would not want to be misunderstood as an unthinking defender of the “sensible centre.” Such a rhetorical pose is yet another form of knee-jerk cheerleading: its sloganeers routinely present themselves as the sane and balanced folks in contrast to those crazed wackos on the left and right. When adopted blindly, political centrism is nothing but a “mean” between whichever political alternatives happen to dominate one’s era, without concern for the decency – or lack thereof – of these alternatives.

In contrast to the mascots, a small number of political commentators are engaged in an honest, open-ended quest for the truth. Like everyone else, they have their biases and presuppositions, and may tend to identify with the political left, right, or centre. Nevertheless, they try to approach a given issue on its own terms without giving cheap thrills to the ideological hooligans in the stands. The work of these commentators tends to be respectful, carefully argued, and based on solid facts. It is also inherently fascinating: one is naturally curious to know what such people think about a given question, and one is keen to see how they come to their conclusions.

The model of this kind of political commentary is rightly held to be George Orwell, whose essays tower over those of other twentieth-century English writers. Like everyone else, Orwell had his blind spots and silly moments, but his essays and journalistic work are almost all worth reading, for they allow us to peer into an active, enquiring, and fundamentally honest mind. Because of these qualities, Orwell has been esteemed by generations of inquisitive writers and journalists, even among those with little sympathy for his left-wing views; conversely, he has been vilified by generations of left- and right-wing party hacks, much to his own credit.

Orwell alienated most of his peers, in part because he refused to squeeze empirical evidence into a preconceived ideological framework. In his writings on colonialism, homelessness, coal mining, and the Spanish Civil War, Orwell was often willing to question his own

cherished assumptions. Moreover, Orwell based these writings on direct experience, and he took care to discuss these subjects within their larger social and historical contexts. By emphasizing the complexity of these subjects, Orwell tried to prevent his readers from judging these issues according to preconceived notions. His writings were like a cold but healthy shower, washing readers clean of ideological muck and jolting them from their dogmatic slumbers.

I have, of course, simplified matters too much. Most Canadian journalists are neither raving ideologues nor independent spirits like Orwell. Nevertheless, journalists can only benefit from Orwell's example, and they can equally benefit by refusing to follow the shabby example of the mascots among them. Newsroom managers and editors should be on the lookout for both types, encouraging the potential Orwells and spurning the ideological loudmouths.

As I have suggested above, journalists can also improve their work by paying greater attention to the broader context in which events occur. The more one does this, the harder it is to be a political mascot, for one cannot take note of the world's complexity without undermining one's faith in facile ideological solutions. As Orwell knew, the search for context is a step toward mental independence.

¹ Attributed to Marshall McLuhan in *The Oxford Dictionary of 20th Century Quotations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

² For an interesting but overly brief piece from outside Canada, see "Pro, con and muddled," *The Economist* (20 March 2003).