



OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF “CASSEROLES” *textes qui bougent au rythme du carré rouge*

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Livestreaming on CUTV: 'Emboldened riot culture' of Student Strike

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Arguably the best media coverage of the student strike in Montreal is coming from an unexpected source – CUTV, or what is now called Community-University TV (formerly Concordia University TV). Live streaming nearly every protest, demonstration and march since the start of the strike, their viewership has grown incrementally to rival that of much larger news organizations, with viewership over 10,000 on peak nights. Mainstream news stations have been lifting CUTV's footage from the internet, interviewing their reporters, and have now started to enter into agreements to obtain footage (Shingler, May 24, 2012). What makes CUTV's coverage so unique?

Aside from the remarkability of their new technology and bilingual coverage, there are several important things going on, of which I will discuss just four. The first is that this is a new approach to what Leah Lievrouw (2011) calls “participatory journalism” (119-148), the kind of reporting that is rooted within a social movement, providing an insider view. She suggests that,

“Local and marginalized communities can resist cultural domination and homogenization, first, by taking a critical view of corporate media products and messages, and, second, by creating and supporting their own local, ‘home-grown’ media and content that better represents their interests, viewpoints and cultures than dominant media sources do” (Lievrouw, 2011, p. 146).

Unlike some forms of participatory journalism, however, where the journalist joins a movement in order to report on it, CUTV is staffed predominantly by student volunteers and is thus not embedded (like war reporters) but grounded or rooted in the student movement and the broader Montreal anti-authoritarian social justice milieu.

Lievrouw argues that although participatory journalism “critiques and opposes the market-driven cynicism and detachment of the mainstream press, it has adapted the practices and values of professional journalism” (148), practices such as objectivity, balanced reporting, and professionalism. However, participatory journalists in fact do not always attempt to recreate these practices. CUTV has expressed repeatedly that they are not unbiased, but rather reporting from the position of the students. Like most community radio and TV, their mandate is to show perspectives not already represented in mainstream media. According to camera operator Laith Marouf, “the



station favours the striking students and their supporters” (Shingler). For CUTV, this means showing the students protesting, and interviewing them on the go. Marouf further argues that, “[i]f people want ‘the voice of the premier and the police and the university rector amplified a million times,’ they can watch corporate media” (Shingler).

In a recent workshop at the Montreal Anarchist Bookfair on “Autonomous Media,” CUTV station manager Laura Kneale, who often is the bilingual voice we hear on CUTV, discussed the importance of actually presenting a biased view. She suggested that the bias of CUTV reveals that in fact the mainstream media also have a bias – as CUTV presents the student viewpoint, a viewpoint largely absent from mainstream reporting. Mainstream journalism claims objectivity and yet, as both Marouf and Kneale suggest, it cannot live up to this commitment. Kneale also mentioned that when interviewed by a mainstream journalist, she was asked whether she wasn’t afraid of being attacked by the protesters. Instead we often see and hear people chanting “CUTV, CUTV!” as the camera crew approaches, and the only attacks witnessed are those of police attacking protesters.

CUTV’s reporting is not striving for the same kind of so-called professionalism or veneer that we see in mainstream news. Rather, we often hear them say they need to switch out their battery, they are pushed away by the police and prevented from filming certain events, or we see that they have stopped marching with the protesters and we get a long pause where the camera seems to be randomly pointed at nothing, while they try to figure out their next move. Better that than corporate advertising, some viewers might say, and others might argue that the lack of veneer allows for profound insight into the student strike marches, the stops and starts, the confusion that often surrounds incidents, such as arrests or kettling, that happen quickly and are hard to follow.

The second interesting thing happening here is that a very small, underfunded, grass-roots media station that does not yet even have CRTC approval, is becoming not just an important media outlet in itself, but also a source for mainstream media. W. Lance Bennett (2003) argues that with the advent of the internet, sometimes memes are created in alternative media that capture the popular imagination, allowing “micro-to-mass media crossover” (33). Bennett cites the example of Peretti’s email exchange with Nike requesting the words ‘sweat shop’ be emblazoned on his shoes, and Nike’s reticence to do so, as the quintessential example, also mentioned by Lievrouw.

The contemporary media ecology sees underground, non-professional media increasingly entering the mainstream news arena. At the G20 protests in Toronto, for example, *Test Their Logik* made an underground video called “G8/G20 Crash the Meeting” that quickly went viral, and a few days later, rapper Illogik was interviewed

on CBC. Further, the Toronto Alternative Media Centre (AMC) organizers found that the mainstream media were following them on Twitter, calling them for leads, and even trying to hang out with independent media reporters at the AMC to get a scoop.

What does this mean for news content? Certainly people rooted in social movements are going to have a better perspective on what's actually happening in the movement, and be able to provide an appropriate analysis of events as they unfold, which is exactly what we see with CUTV. Although some have suggested that it might be better to watch the CUTV livestream with the sound off (Shingler), it is in fact the analytical polemics and frequent interviews presented by the reporters and passing students (and sometimes judges and lawyers) that make the coverage interesting, offering analysis of the strike issues, sharing a wide diversity of reasons for participating in the strike, capturing the diversity of tactics engaged, analyzing events such as mass arrests on the fly, or talking about, in the case of the recent lawyers silent march, why many judges and lawyers feel that Law 78 must be challenged. All of this is what the *National Post* has dubbed an "emboldened riot culture in Canada" (Humphreys, May 18, 2012).

This leads to the third aspect of the coverage – the level of affect or emotion that is made available through intentionally biased, rooted journalism. In addition to their critical political analysis, the reporters actually respond emotionally to various situations that happen. For instance in one livestream that I watched, Laura Kneale, among others, was pepper-sprayed by the police, and the camera crew with her were all kettled. She was in the process of being arrested when apparently a call came in from a higher-up police official saying not to arrest the CUTV journalists. The officer apparently said something along the lines of, "We have to let this piece of shit go." Kneale was taken aback, and when she returned to reporting, she mentioned that she did not appreciate being called a 'piece of shit' and was clearly somewhat traumatized by the event. It came up more than once in the subsequent coverage, and in fact Laith Marouf was later interviewed on CBC about how they had been treated by the police in this particular incident.

This reveals several things. First, of course, it is another example of micro-to-mass media crossover. Second, it shows how the police act as though they are invisible most of the time. They say and do things as if nobody were watching or would speak about it afterwards, whereas when there is a camera present, or journalists are being targeted, then their inappropriate discourse and behavior is amplified and they can be held to account. This is also crucial in coverage of more controversial events such as the police violence in Victoriaville that sent more than one protester to hospital, and traumatized a great number of activists. Third, it reveals the affective side of protest – from the excitement of being engaged in a street protest, the anger at Law 78 which restricts our rights and freedoms, the camaraderie of intergenerational communities banging on pots and pans, the emotional impetus behind why people

feel it is important to be in the streets, how people are feeling about austerity and why they believe tuition should be free, to the more action-driven emotions such as how quickly things unfold on the street demanding snap decision-making, how people might get kettled despite not being involved in the protest, and how traumatizing certain interactions can be, particularly when police violence is experienced or witnessed. CUTV streams not just a diversity of tactics, but also an important diversity of affect.

The fourth aspect of their coverage is its consistency – the camera crew is out in the streets every day and every night. The constancy of their coverage means that systemic abuses of the police, such as sexual harassment of women activists and bystanders, are revealed, as we witness the same thing happening day after day – male officers singling out female activists in short skirts for ‘attention’, and ‘frisking’ them, while male activists being detained and arrested are not so much as asked to empty their pockets.

Of course CUTV has its limitations. They can only be in one place at any given time, so we see only one perspective. With casserole protests happening all over the city, the camera crew is limited in how many they can cover and for how long. Their battery does not last forever, and they have overrun their budget for livestreaming hours in May. Their funding is dependent on student fee levies. And they must all be very exhausted since they seem to stay on the streets from the beginning of every night march to the very end, going offline as the last of the diehard activists depart or are kettled and then one by one arrested.

While the mainstream media is quick to denounce student and alternative media as biased and unprofessional, CUTVs street-smart journalism demonstrates the importance of exactly these two characteristics in getting an authentic, affective story from the ongoing student strike. With the May 31st collapse of talks, and an intransigent government refusing to see how deep the social unrest goes, many viewers will be turning to CUTV for live coverage of what promises to be an escalating series of protests to come.

References

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