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# Commentary on Galia Yanoshevsky: “Dissensus at Times of Consensus: Arguing *Against* in Editorials”

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Galia Yanoshevsky's thesis is that (mainstream) news media tend to “support the flag” in a war while maintaining a veneer of critical distance. She offers several examples from Israeli coverage of the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. I will make two connections with Canadian events in response to Yanoshevsky's thesis. The first example shows the imposition of a positive news and editorial slant on an event construed previously as highly negative; the second example shows an increasingly negative news slant that undermines the position of the federal government but which supports and reinforces the general public mood.

My first example concerns the election in Ontario in 1995 of the Progressive Conservative government of Mike Harris. At the time of Harris's election, the local newspaper the *Windsor Star* adopted a tough stance on the new regime, emphasizing the highly controversial nature of the many changes and initiatives that the government implemented with striking rapidity after taking office. The *Star* even offered a highly unusual and nakedly critical full-page retrospective of the Harris government's (alleged) misdeeds at the end of 1995, the government's first half-year in power. This stress on the (allegedly) bad or questionable character of the recently elected regime reflected the often strongly negative attitudes of many local citizens, who tend conspicuously to support the Liberal Party and the New Democratic Party, and who at the time were accustomed to a solid decade of Liberal and NDP rule from Toronto. (Windsor has not elected a Conservative representative in four decades.) Ontarians gave Harris a majority government and thus a clear mandate to pursue an unabashedly conservative agenda, so the nature and tone of the *Windsor Star*'s coverage, while consistent with local views, represented a minority political perspective in the province.

Full control of the *Windsor Star* soon lay in the hands of Conrad Black, and its political flavour followed suit. The *Star*'s coverage of the provincial government changed dramatically from consistent negativity to smooth acceptance of the new conservative status quo and even what I consider to be open gerrymandering in favour of the Harris regime (for example, burying clearly unfavourable objective news about the government deep in a section bearing an innocuous headline). The paper's new approach ran roughshod over the predominant local orientation – the typical sensibilities of the paper's own subscribers – yet it dovetailed neatly with the freshly established order of politics and especially business in the jurisdiction as a whole. This striking divergence between the *Star* and its immediate community was secondary to the paper's endorsement of the new orthodoxy in the province as a whole. The *Star*'s support of the Harris government, despite tepid efforts at “balance,” made it part of the mainstream.

My second example is the case of the current (2007) military campaign in Afghanistan. Canada's involvement in Afghanistan followed the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks in the United States, which killed two dozen Canadians. Afghanistan, of course, gave refuge to Osama Bin Laden, the leader of the Al-Qaeda group that committed the attacks. The federal Liberal government under Prime Minister Jean Chrétien initiated this action with relatively muted opposition. The citizenry understood that progress requires time, so the first few years of the campaign did not elicit widespread disfavour or disillusionment. This far-flung military initiative, while a departure from Canada's self-concept as a peacekeeping nation instead a fighting one, enjoyed sufficient support, in part because of the Liberal government's low-keyed approach to the matter. Canadian involvement in Afghanistan appeared even more sensible in light of the American attempt in 2003 to include Canada in the now disastrous war in Iraq. Canada declined to join the "coalition of the willing" on the ground that it was already fully occupied fighting terrorism in the former Taliban state.

As the campaign continued, however, casualties mounted, and the public became captivated by stunning roadside and suicide attacks on Canadian personnel. A decisive change occurred with the election in 2005 of the Conservatives under Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who increased the military's languishing budget, affirmed unequivocally the need for fighting as well as reconstruction and development, and committed himself to staying the course. This change in both practice and tone concerning the military marked a clear divergence from the peacekeeping tradition of the late Prime Minister Lester Pearson, winner of the 1957 Nobel Peace Prize. Harper chose Afghanistan as the destination of his first foreign trip as Prime Minister, visiting shortly after taking office. He visited again at the time of writing (May 2007). With Canadians increasingly opposed to the fighting (but not necessarily to reconstruction and development) and calls for withdrawal, Prime Minister Harper found himself increasingly the champion of a challenged cause. A central turning point was the decision by the Prime Minister's Office shortly after taking power to ban media coverage of the coffins of soldiers returning home. In addition, the government reversed the previous regime's practice of lowering the flag on Parliament Hill when deaths in battle occurred. Many saw the government as attempting to fool Canadians by occluding the harsh realities of the campaign. Mainstream media coverage of the campaign in Afghanistan, while certainly providing room for the government's views, began to accent the unfortunate and the unpopular, thus shoring up the now common sentiment of disapproval.

My first example concerning provincial politics, while obviously not a matter of war, is surely an instance of great upheaval in provincial politics. Conrad Black's unusually determined influence on the *Star's* slant is a confounding factor, as he may well have pushed a pronounced conservative agenda under any political circumstances, even in a "liberal" and therefore potentially hostile region such as Windsor. At the same time, the paper's changed orientation indeed fit well the new regional order and reinforced the hegemonic view of Windsor as unimportant because of its relative isolation and, as under Conservative federal governments, even guilty on account of its long-standing and unabashed "liberal" perspective. The province-wide perception of Harris's "Common Sense Revolution" as a blow in favour of vastly overdue "pragmatism" made the *Star's* self-appointed task easier. (If, however, Black counted on retaining Windsor readers because the paper is "the only game in town," he miscalculated, as the *Star* began losing readers as the changes unfolded.) My second example drawn from national politics concerns war, but the phenomenon is a matter of a majority opposed to a war, albeit one that is small and far away. Yanoshevsky's thesis, then, is intriguing food for thought; we need empirical studies of Canadian media to determine whether, and the extent to which, a "critical veneer effect" exists and reflects a consensus (in any direction) within an organic region or jurisdiction (of any scope).

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