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UNFIT FOR MATURE DEMOCRACY: DISSENT IN THE MEDIA AND THE SCHOOLS

On Sunday, August 29, 2004, several hundred thousand protesters¹ marched up Sixth Avenue in Manhattan, past Madison Square Garden. It was the day before the Republican National Convention and the marchers sought to demonstrate to the delegates and the nation their strong opposition to the Iraq war. Sharpshooters were poised on the roof of the Garden and several police helicopters circled. On a 3-story-high live-screen TV above the throngs, Fox News steadily broadcast a repeating video clip of workers inside Madison Square Garden unfolding empty chairs in preparation for the following day's convention. There was no mention or picture of the hundreds of thousands of protesters walking right outside of Fox's New York headquarters for the entire day. It was as if the protesters did not exist (see Figures 1-4 in the Appendix). It was an odd reminder for many New Yorkers of the weeks and months that followed the September 11 attacks three years earlier. At that time, weekly protests in Union Square warning against overly hasty military revenge were summarily ignored by not only the conservative media but by virtually *all* domestic radio, television and printed news.²

This chapter examines the role of the media in revealing or concealing dissent following September 11, 2001 and its impact on schools. Through an examination of media trends (in particular during the coverage of the Iraq war), civic education policies, and post 9/11 curricular changes, I focus my inquiry on the place of dissent in democratic societies and the threats to democratic deliberation resulting from an ever-narrowing civic agenda. A few weeks after the September 11 attacks, Susan Sontag wrote in a *New Yorker* editorial that "the unanimity of the sanctimonious, reality-concealing rhetoric spouted by American officials and media commentators in recent days seems, well, unworthy of a mature democracy" (2001: 41). This chapter asks what we might demand of the media and the schools for a proper "mature democracy" to flourish.

CONSENT AND CONSEQUENCES: MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE
WAR IN IRAQ

In *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988), Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman argue that ordinary people in a democracy can and should participate in making informed political decisions, but that the information required to make these decisions is constrained by a system of half truths or misinformation promulgated primarily by the media.³ In a dictatorship, they argue, what people think is of little importance because the state enforces its will (which represents the interests of a small elite) through force: do what we say or else. But in a democracy, means of control need to be more subtle; since citizens are allowed to voice their opinions, it becomes necessary to control their opinions (“propaganda is to democracy what violence is to totalitarianism”). To exercise control over what might be unpopular political decisions, then, the state must direct the range of perspectives that are voiced. One of the ways to do this, Chomsky contends, is to ensure that political debate appears to embrace many opinions (what he calls *necessary illusions*), but actually stays within very narrow margins. The manufacture of consent – a phrase Chomsky and Herman borrow from the influential journalist Walter Lippman (1922) – allows government coercive power and control while maintaining the illusion of democracy.

Not only are the consequences of such restricted debate devastating to fundamental principles of real democracy, but they are also self-reinforcing: *the more narrow the range of ideas to which people are exposed, the less they inquire about or imagine alternatives*. In time, it becomes unnecessary for the state to restrict legitimate debate, because citizens and non-governmental institutions do it on their own. In sharp contrast, then, to the dystopic vision of an authoritarian, repressive government represented by works of fiction such as Orwell’s *Nineteen-Eighty Four*, media-driven propaganda relies on the atrophied politics of the people themselves. The repression is not top-down but rather bottom-up. In other words, as the popular 1950s comic strip character Pogo famously said, “we have met the enemy, and he is us.”

The efforts of former President George W. Bush and his administration to promote national consent in order to invade Iraq in search of imaginary weapons of mass destruction (and the complicity of public representatives in congress) offer a compelling illustration of manufactured consent and its consequences. Because it is now commonplace to hear critics represented alongside proponents for the American-led invasion of Iraq, it might be easy to forget that media coverage of the war’s first three or four years was not so evenhanded. A number of studies document the imbalanced coverage of the war before the US and coalition forces invaded Iraq in

March 2003, during the initial stages of the war including the capture of Saddam Hussein, and during the increasingly violent aftermath (Christie, 2006; Giles, 2003; O'Hanlon & Kamp; Rojecki, 2008; Schwalbe et al., 2008; Todorov & Madisodza, 2004).

Constructing Consent

In what author Eric Boehlert calls “one of the great journalistic collapses of our time” (2006), a vast majority of media outlets in the lead-up to the Iraq war relied almost exclusively on information provided by the White House, Pentagon, and State Department. Media analyst Andrew Tyndall examined 414 news stories broadcast on NBC, CBS, and ABC from September 2002 until February 2003 and found that more than 90 percent could be traced back to one of these government sources. Only 34 stories were of independent origin (Tyndall, 2003). The New York Times later even apologized for their anemic coverage: “Looking back, we wish we had been more aggressive in re-examining the claims as new evidence emerged — or failed to emerge” (New York Times, 2004).

Another study conducted by the media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting found equally disturbing negligence concerning the media's choice of on-camera public opinion segments. During the first two weeks of February 2003, the report found, debate about the war “should have been raging on the public airwaves.” Yet of 393 people interviewed on-camera for network news, only 6 percent were those who expressed any skepticism about the impending U.S. invasion. As Boehlert observes in his 2006 book, *Lapdog: How the Press Rolled Over for Bush*, these statistics hardly reflected a representative sample of Americans:

Keep in mind, at that time a majority of Americans – 61 percent according to one national poll – expressed some skepticism over the war; specifically favoring diplomacy over invasion. But on television, the narrative was quite different (212).

And those U.S. senators who opposed the war were similarly disregarded. According to Media Matters for America, although 23 percent of U.S. senators voted to oppose the war in the fall of 2002, only a small percentage of senators invited to appear on the Sunday morning talk shows prior to the invasion were those who had expressed anti-war views. During Colin Powell's 90 minute address to the United Nations, (which every network covered in its entirety), news outlets even created “special logos” and story identifiers such as “Making the Case for War” further privileging official positions to “construct war as not only the optimal option, but the only option” (Cappuccio, 2006: 3).

Neither were dissenting views covered after the war began. Carol Schwalbe and colleagues studied thousands of news images in the first few weeks of the war and found that not only were views that contradicted official government proclamations about the war's progress ignored by all mainstream media outlets, but that even in the human interest stories, there were "few portrayals of the injuries and death of war" (2008: 455). After the administration of former President George W. Bush had abandoned its initial justifications for invading Iraq, Wolfe and colleagues argue, prominent US news organizations continued to present Americans with "pro-Bush administration [and] pro-war readings of the events reported" (2008: 38).

As public support for the war continued to plummet, the media it seems – rather than covering the growing national anti-war consensus – chose to reduce coverage of the war altogether. In "How the Media Abandoned Iraq," a recent retrospective report in the *American Journalism Review*, professor Sherry Ricchiardi writes that "[w]hile Iraq accounted for 23 percent of the TV news in 2007, it plummeted to 3 percent during 2008" (2008: 36). *Editor and Publisher* editor Greg Mitchell calls media coverage of popular positions that run counter to government policy "the true test of taking dissent seriously" (cited in Johnson, 2002: A3). The American media coverage of the Iraq war, Mitchell notes, woefully failed that test.

In short, dissenting voices – those that resisted official positions on the war – were minimized by the media or ignored altogether during both the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq and during the initial stages of the war. As "Operation Iraqi Freedom" became increasingly open-ended (despite "Mission Accomplished" claims of the administration), and Iraq became increasingly violent, opposition to the war began to be covered as a small subset of overall coverage of the war. That overall coverage, however, was reduced to near silence, displaced by intensive coverage of the Democratic and Republican primaries, the looming economic downturn, and the 2008 presidential election campaigns.

And Consequences

When the dissemination of information is restricted – whether by government policy or public choice – public knowledge suffers. The constricted media analysis described above coupled with Bush administration legislation limiting civil liberties and the expression of dissent (for example: the Patriot Act, the creation of so-called "free-speech zones" and the Pentagon ban on photographs of coffins returning from Iraq) had significant effects on public understanding of important information regarding the ongoing war. An October 2003 analysis of a series of polls conducted that year found that 48% of Americans incorrectly

believed that links had been found between Iraq and al-Qaeda. One quarter incorrectly believed that world public opinion supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq. And one out of five Americans continued to believe, erroneously, that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq (PIPA, 2003). Such misinformation has consequences: the more misinformed respondents seemed to be, the more likely they were to support the war.⁴

Similarly, a 2004 study which surveyed public opinion just after Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations found that Americans overestimated the levels of public support for unilateral foreign policy among their compatriots. Moreover, "those who incorrectly perceived the unilateral view as the majority view were nearly twice as likely to support U.S. invasion of Iraq without UN Security Council approval" (2004: 82).

Even today, the public's knowledge of basic facts concerning American engagement in Iraq and its consequences remains wanting. According to a 2007 AP-Ipsos poll, for example, Americans are keenly aware of how many U.S. soldiers have lost their lives in Iraq (more than 4,200 as of this writing). But they are woefully misinformed when it comes to the number of Iraqi civilians who have been killed. Among those polled for the survey, the median estimate of Iraqi deaths was just under 10,000. Meanwhile, a Johns Hopkins study of Iraqi casualties puts the "excess" death toll (deaths attributable to the war) at a horrific three quarters of a million (the population of San Francisco or the combined populations of Boston and Kansas City).⁵ Although virtually everyone now agrees that the Iraq war was fought on the faulty premise that Iraq maintained weapons of mass destruction, misinformation about the consequences of the war still abound.

NO CHILD LEFT DISSENTING: THE WAR ON CRITICAL THINKING

Growing public acceptance of limitations on freedoms previously taken for granted, political rhetoric equating dissent with support for terrorism (you're either with us or you're with the terrorists), and a war-time mentality of my-country-right-or-wrong patriotism led not only to relatively unchallenged consent among adults but the erosion of critical thinking in educational programs for children and youth. In the midst of the 2008 presidential election season, the educationally vapid No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation's final automatic extension expired with little fanfare. A curious provision in the General Education Provisions Act provides funding under this extension to endure the 2008–9 school year, but a mix of under-funding and arrogance on the part of federal lawmakers made renewing NCLB politically impracticable, at least for now. A great deal of damage, however, has already been wrought when it comes to lessons about dissent. State and district challenges to NCLB have focused

almost exclusively on the fact that federal requirements do not come with associated funding and are therefore impossible to meet. While such opposition has allowed for unified action among diverse stakeholders, the failure to attack the specifically educational shortcomings of the legislation have allowed a quiet war on critical thinking and dissent to be waged in classrooms and schools across the nation.

Hundreds of schools, districts, states, and even the federal government have enacted policies that seek to restrict critical analysis of historical and contemporary events in the school curriculum. In June 2006, the Florida Education Omnibus Bill included language specifying that “The history of the United States shall be taught as genuine history. ... American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable” (Florida Senate, 2006: 3). Other provisions in the bill mandate “flag education, including proper flag display” and “flag salute,” and require educators to stress the importance of free enterprise to the U.S. economy. But what some find most alarming is the stated goal of the bill’s designers: “to raise historical literacy” with a particular emphasis on the “teaching of facts.” For example, the bill requires that only facts be taught when it comes to discussing the “period of discovery” and the early colonies. Florida is perhaps the first state to ban historical interpretation in public schools, thereby effectively outlawing critical thinking and the study of dissent (Craig, 2006).

Of course, historians almost universally regard history as exactly a matter of interpretation; indeed, the competing interpretations are what make history so interesting. Historians and educators alike have widely derided the mandated adherence to an “official story” embodied in the Florida legislation, but the impact of such mandates should not be underestimated—especially because Florida is not alone.

The drive to engage schools in reinforcing a unilateral understanding of U.S. history and policy shows no sign of abating. More and more, teachers and students are seeing their schools or entire districts and states limiting their ability to explore multiple perspectives to controversial issues. Students and a drama teacher in a Connecticut high school spent months researching, writing and rehearsing a play they wrote about the Iraq war titled “Voices in Conflict.” Before the scheduled performance, the school administration banned the play on the basis that it was “inappropriate.” (The students went on to perform the play in the spring of 2007 on an off-Broadway stage in New York to impressive critical review.) In Colorado, a student was suspended for posting flyers advertising a student protest. In Bay City, Michigan, wearing a T-shirt with an anti-war quotation by Albert Einstein was grounds for suspension (American Civil Liberties Union, 2004).

The federal role in discouraging critical analysis of historical events has been significant as well, especially following September 11, 2001. In 2002,

six months before the start of the Iraq war, the U.S. Department of Education announced a new set of history and civic education initiatives that the president said would “improve students’ knowledge of American history, increase their civic involvement, and deepen their love for our great country” (Bush, 2002: 1). We must, he emphasized, teach our children that “America is a force for good in the world, bringing hope and freedom to other people.” Similarly, in 2004, Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander (former U.S. secretary of education under President Ronald Reagan) warned that educators should not expose students to competing ideas in historical texts. Civics, he argued, should be put back in its “rightful place in our schools, so our children can grow up learning what it means to be an American” (Alexander 2003: 2). Presumably, for Alexander, what it means to be an American is more answer than question. Reaching back to a 1950s understanding of the American past and the workings of American society, Alexander and likeminded politicians suggest that Americans, while representing diverse backgrounds and cultures, are all part of a unified American creed or a common set of beliefs, and that these beliefs are easily identifiable. Explicitly borrowing from consensus historian Richard Hofstadter, Senator Alexander believes that “it has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one” (Hofstadter, quoted in Alexander 2003: 2).

As many people have observed, the high-stakes testing mandated by NCLB has further pushed to the margins education efforts that challenge students to grapple with tough questions about society and the world. In a recent study by the Center on Education Policy (Rentner et al. 2006), 71 percent of districts reported cutting back time for other subjects—social studies in particular—to make more space for reading and math instruction. Indeed, historian David McCullough testified before a U.S. Senate committee that, because of NCLB, “history is being put on the back burner or taken off the stove altogether in many or most schools” (Dillon 2006). An increasing number of students are getting little to no education about how government works, about the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the evolution of social movements, and U.S. and world history. As Peter Campbell (2006), Missouri State Coordinator for FairTest, noted,

The sociopolitical implications of poor black and Hispanic children not learning about the Civil Rights movement, not learning about women’s suffrage, not learning about the U.S. Civil War, and not learning about any historical or contemporary instance of civil disobedience is more than just chilling. It smacks of an Orwellian attempt not merely to rewrite history, but to get rid of it.

The implications Campbell describes are not limited to poor black and Hispanic students. Any student being denied knowledge about historical events and social movements, in particular, misses out on important opportunities to link his or her education to the quintessentially democratic struggles for a better society for all.

I focus on history teaching here, but the trend is not limited to social studies. In many states, virtually every subject area is under scrutiny for any deviation from one single narrative, based on knowable, testable, and purportedly uncontested facts. An English teacher, in a recent study undertaken by colleagues and myself, told us that even novel reading was now prescriptive in her state's rubric: meanings predetermined, vocabulary words preselected, and essay topics predigested. A science teacher put it this way: "The only part of the science curriculum now being critically analyzed is evolution."

Although some of the more restrictive policies were pushed through legislatures seeking to respond immediately to the September 11 attacks, recent school reform efforts do not always seem to benefit from the kind of cooler and more clear-headed thinking that we might expect would come with time. I have previously written about a Nebraska law—Bill 982—that required school boards to appoint a committee on "Americanism" and to "[arrange] its curriculum in such a way that the love of ... America will be instilled in the hearts and minds of the youth of the state."⁶ As a result, Nebraska's State Board of Education issued the following mandate: "Teaching citizenship [must] include instruction in ... the benefits and advantages of our government, the dangers of ... communism and similar ideologies, the duties of citizenship, and appropriate patriotic exercises"

But as recently as April 2008, the Arizona House of Representatives passed SB 1108, specifying that schools whose teachings "denigrate or encourage dissent" from American values, "including democracy, capitalism, pluralism, and religious toleration," would lose state funding. Furthermore, the Arizona bill continues: "[P]ublic tax dollars should not be used to promote political, religious, ideological, or cultural values as truth when such values are in conflict with the values of American citizenship and the teachings of Western civilization." Under the proposed bill, schools would be required to surrender teaching materials to the state superintendent of public instruction, who could withhold state aid from districts that broke the law. In defending the proposed legislation, Representative Andy Biggs (R-Gilbert) argued that lawmakers are entitled to regulate the use of tax dollars taken from Arizonans and "demand that our publicly funded education teach and inculcate our youth, our children with the values that make America what it is, the greatest and most free nation in the world" (East Valley Tribune, 2008: 1).

Independent schools have not avoided the consequences of the war on thinking. In much the same way that the media self-censors, as Chomsky argues, private schools have restricted their curricula on their own. Indeed, as the goals for K–12 public education have shifted away from preparing active and engaged public citizens and towards more narrow goals of career preparation and individual economic gain, independent schools have, in many ways, led the pack. Pressures from parents and board members, and a broad cultural shift in educational priorities, have resulted in schools across the country being seen primarily as conduits for individual success, and lessons aimed at exploring democratic responsibilities – including the role of dissent and the consideration of multiple perspectives – have increasingly been crowded out. A steadily growing body of research in the United States now echoes what Tony Hubbard, former director of the United Kingdom’s Independent Schools Inspectorate, stated most plainly after reviewing data from an extensive study of British independent schools: because of the immense pressure to achieve high academic results on exams and elevate prestigious college entrance rates, independent schools are “over-directed” so that students do not have “sufficient opportunity or incentive to think for themselves.” Increasingly following formulas that “spoon-feed” students to succeed on narrow academic tests, independent schools, Hubbard warned, “teach students not to think.”

Too many schools have become oriented towards pedagogical models of efficiency that discourage deeper consideration of important dissenting perspectives. The relentless focus on testing and “achievement” means that time for in-depth critical analysis of ideas is diminished. Current school reform policies and many classroom practices too often reduce teaching and learning to exactly the kind of mindless rule-following that makes students unable to take principled dissenting stands that have long been associated with American democracy and are already under-represented by mainstream media. The hidden curriculum of post-NCLB classrooms is how to please authority and pass the tests, not how to consider alternative viewpoints, develop one’s own convictions, and stand up for those convictions.

Channel One

Perhaps the greatest confluence of media-manufactured consent and no-child-left-dissenting curriculum, however, is represented by the case of Channel One news. Broadcast to more than eight million public school students daily, Channel One provides schools with the free use of video equipment as long as the schools make Channel One’s daily 10 minute news broadcast required viewing for at least 80% of students. Twenty percent of each broadcast is paid advertising – commercials targeted directly at the known demographic of the captive school-age audience. A

number of studies of Channel One – most notably one commissioned by Channel One’s sponsoring corporation – have found that students who watch the 10-12 minute news segment show little gains in knowledge about current events but show excellent recall of the content of the commercials. In fact, according to one study, less than one fifth of the news show is devoted to coverage of "recent political, economic, social, and cultural stories." The remaining 80 percent is spent on advertising, sports, weather and natural disasters, features, and Channel One promotions. Channel One, the researchers note, also features “two minutes per day of skillful advertising primarily for junk food and video games that must be shown to students under the terms of the Channel One contract.”

In the short amount of time that is devoted to current events, the coverage during the Iraq war was one-dimensional and decidedly conservative, always reinforcing the Bush administration’s positions. In one detailed and methodical study of the news program from September 2003 to May 2005, the investigator found that Channel One had an overwhelming focus on one perspective only – the official government position on any major issue concerning the ongoing war in Iraq. In the coverage of the national conventions for the two major political parties, Channel One devoted 16% of airtime on that topic to the Democratic National Convention and 86% to the Republican National Convention (Worsham, 2008). Furthermore, the corporate executives responsible for Channel One broadcasts during the Iraq war were also very active in pursuing a politically conservative agenda. A Channel One vice president was a high-profile Republican fundraiser. []

PATHOLOGIZING DISSENT IN CHILDREN: OPPOSITIONAL DEFIANT DISORDER

In addition to media practices and curricular policies that either directly or indirectly eliminate dissenting voices from television screens, classroom texts and in-school discussions, a more insidious aspect of the war on thinking can be found in the pathologizing or medicalizing of oppositional behavior in children. Over-prescription of drugs like Ritalin (methylphenidate) to control behaviors that were previously considered manageable through behavioral interventions is well-documented. But far less critical analysis has been directed at the increasing diagnosis rate for a relatively new category of illness known as conduct and oppositional disorders.

The latest edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) includes a relatively new psychiatric disorder called Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), defining it as “a pattern of

negativistic, hostile and defiant behavior. A child with ODD, according to the DSM-IV, “often argues with adults,” “actively defies or refuses to comply with adult requests or rules,” and is “touchy or easily annoyed by others.” Various treatments and psychiatric interventions are recommended for treating ODD including cognitive behavioral therapy and even the prescription of powerful anti-psychotic medications such as Risperdal (risperidone) or Zyprexa (olanzapine).

I am not a medical expert, and I do not in any way intend to disparage the difficulties children and parents might face when a child is legitimately diagnosed with ODD. It certainly is possible that there are children who have oppositional difficulties that are in need of treatment. A small but growing body of evidence, however, indicates that ODD diagnoses have increased significantly. Moreover, anecdotal evidence posits that those increases are largely attributable to concerns about student behavior raised by schools. Statistics about rates of ODD diagnoses are remarkably hard to come by, but several exploratory studies indicate what might be an immensely troubling trend. In 1996, the diagnosis rate for ODD in school-age children was between 1 and 6 percent. In 2008, the National Institute for Health notes that some studies now indicate that 10 – 15% of school-age children can be diagnosed with ODD. Prevalence of ODD in primary-care settings (children ages 2-5) has reached 17% or higher (National Institute for Health, 2008).⁷ Furthermore, as Lahey and colleagues point out, both Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Conduct Disorder are more prevalent among youths from families of low socioeconomic status (1999; also Loeber 2000 p. 1475).

The implications of the rise in ODD diagnoses among school-age children led Oregon educator Norm Diamond to suggest that a new as-of-yet undiagnosed disease was sweeping the nation. He coined this new disease CAD: Compliance Acquiescent Disorder. Symptoms for CAD, Diamond joked, can be seen when a student often “defers to authority,” “reflexively obeys rules,” “believes the commercial media,” “fails to argue back,” and “stays restrained when outrage is warranted.” Like Diamond, I wonder if we had an inventory for CAD, whether we might find a virtual epidemic of the disease. As the attacks on dissent and critical thinking continue, in the media, in public discourse, and in schools, we are increasingly at risk of fostering an entire generation of those who – as education critic Alfie Kohn put it – fail to be outraged by outrageous things. Indeed, at the same time that former White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer admonished all Americans to “watch what they say, watch what they do,” thousands of children in school districts across the country who showed defiant behavior, perhaps refusing to “comply with adult requests or rules” were being classified as mentally ill, disciplined, counseled, and in some cases, medicated.

One of the first expressions of concern over the prevalence of ODD and so-called “Conduct Disorder” diagnoses came from Dr. Charles Huffine. In 2000, Huffine wrote in the *Clinical Psychiatry News*’s “Pros & Cons” column (April, p. 4) that Conduct Disorder “is a dangerous diagnosis [and,] as delineated in the DSM-IV...simply categorizes extrinsic behavior. As such, it is not really a diagnosis at all.” One advertising campaign for a program to deal with ODD children reflects the simplification that Huffine warns about, even employing the language of homeland security to describe oppositional defiance disorder as “The War at Home.”⁸

The unwitting alliance with the growing rhetoric of unchallenged consent among adults calls for considerable caution when it comes to the medicalization of defiance among children. On February 26, 2003, Fox News commentator Bill O’Reilly proclaimed that when the war against Saddam Hussein begins, “we expect every American to support our military, and if they can’t do that, to shut up...Americans and, indeed, our allies who actively work against our military once the war is under way will be considered enemies of the state by me” (cited in Tomasky, 2003: 22). Schools run the risk of conveying a similar message to students.

WHAT’S AT STAKE IN THE CASE AGAINST DISSENT: THE HUMAN AND ECONOMIC COSTS OF THE IRAQ WAR

Curiously, wartime almost always invites a number of citizens to call for “closing ranks” much in the same way Bill O’Reilly described above. Wartime is no time to critically evaluate government decisions on U.S. engagement. The idea that citizens should not publicly criticize the government is, of course, central to every aspiring fascist nation in the history of the world. If you criticize us, the thinking goes, you are supporting the enemy. It should be evident that any democratic society must respect dissent, especially when it is unpopular and when the issue being debated is of such monumental consequence. When thousands, tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of lives are at stake, suppressing or ignoring dissenting views that might inform policy decisions seems especially worrisome. As Mordechai Gordon points out in the first chapter of this book, overwhelming consensus destroys real democracy. One can only wonder whether those who advocate a war-time doctrine of follow-the-leader-no-matter-what realize what is at stake. Here, for example, are some factual reminders about the Iraq war for all of us:

- The ongoing Iraq war has lasted 6 years (as of the publication of this book) and counting

- The combined duration of U.S. participation in World War I, World War II, and the 1991 Gulf War is 5.5 years. The Korean War lasted 3 years and the War in Vietnam lasted more than 10 years.
- 2,974 U.S. civilians were killed in the attacks on the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and United Airlines flight 93.
- As of the writing of this chapter, more than 1 ½ times that number of American soldiers have been killed in the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan (this does not include fatalities among coalition member-nations).
- If the Johns Hopkins study is correct, then that same number (2,974) of Iraqi civilians have been killed *every week for the past five and a half years* (even far more conservative estimates of Iraqi civilian fatalities would mean that more civilians are killed each *month* than died in the September 11 attack).
- More than 2,000 U.S. children have lost a mother or a father in Iraq.
- There are no accurate estimates of Iraqi children who have lost a parent, but the number surely exceeds one million.
- The number of Iraqis who have left their homes and are now refugees or internally displaced persons (at least 4.4 million according to CIA and Congressional Research Service reports⁹) now surpasses the populations of the states of Alaska, North and South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, and Delaware, combined.

As the actual human cost of the war far exceeds Americans' estimations of these costs, so too do the economic opportunity costs. The following figures pertain to U.S. operations in Iraq only:

- Operation "Iraqi Freedom" is costing U.S. taxpayers \$343 million per day.
- This means that for one day's expenditure on the war, we could hire 6,000 new teachers and pay their salaries for a year or enroll 45,000 children in Head Start.
- We could buy 130,000 uninsured Americans health insurance or eliminate 27 million tons of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.¹⁰
- The cost of just one of the five and a half year's of the war would pay for health insurance for *all* 10 million uninsured American children for an entire decade.

Former chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, Joseph E. Stiglitz, estimates the final cost of the war will be three trillion dollars (Washington Post, 2008). If we decide that the actual cost will be only *half*

of that final estimate (an unrealistically conservative prediction), then the Bush administration chose to spend 1.5 trillion dollars that might have been spent elsewhere. This number – only half of Stiglitz’ estimate – requires effort of the imagination to fully comprehend:

- 1.5 trillion dollars could have paid for 73 million full four-year scholarships to public universities – nothing to scoff at since fewer than three million students graduated from all U.S. high schools this year.¹¹
- This money could have provided 14 years of health insurance to all 42.6 million uninsured Americans.
- If, instead, we focused on health insurance for uninsured children only, then we could have provided the nation’s uninsured children with health insurance for about one and a half centuries.

The federal budget allocation is always a matter of choices – given a limited budget pie, choices must be made on how to spend slices of varying size. It is perhaps a political inevitability that administration officials, members of congress, and candidates in local, state, and federal elections will rarely choose to frame budget allocation questions in terms of choices: if we fund x, then we will not fund y. But these are exactly the kinds of terms in which a robust media in a democratic society should function.

A THINKING CURRICULUM: DISSENT IN THE MEDIA AND THE SCHOOLS

Dissent is the engine of our democracy. Even – perhaps especially – in the face of the threat of terrible violence, multiple perspectives on government actions are essential. Indeed, military strength may sometimes be useful, but it is also banal. Robust democratic deliberation and debate, by contrast, is extraordinary and rare. Much as Darwin’s theory of natural selection depends on genetic variation, any theory of democracy depends on a multiplicity of ideas. It is the responsibility of the citizenry, the media, and the schools to safeguard the expression of those ideas.

What if CNN had posted the following kinds of statistics on the moving ticker at the bottom of the screen anytime they were reporting on the Iraq war? For example, during reports taking place in September 2006, three years and seven months after the war began and three years and five months after then-President Bush gave a televised address in front of the

banner declaring “Mission Accomplished” aboard the aircraft carrier USS *Abraham Lincoln*:

... 18 American soldiers, 36 Iraqi Security Forces, and 847 Iraqi civilians killed in Iraq this week 2,715 Americans and an estimated ½ million Iraqi civilians killed since the war began, according to a Johns Hopkins University study 7 deaths this hour from war violence in Iraq 31 Iraqi children under the age of 12 killed this week from aerial attacks by coalition forces 1400 American children have lost a parent to the Iraq war 3.5 million Iraqis have left their homes as refugees to neighboring countries or as internally displaced persons in safer areas of Iraq ...

Would this be responsible media journalism? Would it be sensationalist? Would it risk American national security? Would it inflame the tempers of government officials? I do not know the answers to all of these questions. But I am certain that it is essential that we ask them. It would hardly seem preposterous to expect the major U.S. television networks, national newspapers, and internet news sources to report statistical facts, or – where disputed – the various estimates and which organizations they come from. These figures have been available from a variety of sources but rarely represented in the media, especially during the lead-up and first 3 years of the war when dissenting voices were all but ignored.

Schools have responsibilities to democracy as well. Healthy and productive dissent is one hallmark of a mature democracy, and educators have a responsibility to create learning environments that help to realize the nation’s finest democratic potential. There are many varied and powerful ways to teach children and young adults to engage critically with social policy issues, participate in authentic debate over matters of importance, and understand that intelligent adults can have different opinions. Indeed democratic progress depends on these differences. While a significant body of work has been written in this regard, I want to offer just a few examples of the possibilities for curriculum aimed, in particular, at understanding the importance of dissent to democratic societies.

For example, longtime teacher Brian Schultz’s inspiring efforts with his 5th grade class in Chicago’s Cabrini-Green housing project area included having his students conduct research on improving conditions in their own neighborhood, especially with regard to broken promises to build a new school. His students studied historical approaches to change and, rejecting passivity, demonstrated a deep attachment to their community and neighbors. Each step of the way, they grappled with the multiple perspectives surrounding the issues they studied as they related those

perspectives to the political and economic reality of their surroundings (Schultz, 2008).

Bob Peterson, a one-time Wisconsin Elementary Teacher of the Year, worked with his students at La Escuela Fratney in Madison to examine the full spectrum of ideological positions that emerged following the events of September 11, 2001 and the policies that followed. Instead of avoiding the challenging questions his 5th grade students posed, Peterson encouraged them, placing a notebook prominently at the front of the classroom labeled “Questions That We Have.” As the students discussed their questions and the unfolding current events, Peterson repeatedly asked students to consider multiple perspectives and their responsibilities to one another and to their community. Through poetry (Langston Hughes’s “Let America Be America Again”); historical readings (the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the 1918 Sedition Act); and current events (photographs of September 11 memorial gatherings, protests in the United States and abroad, newspaper editorials), Peterson allowed students to explore the ways dissent is handled historically and in contemporary arenas – political events surrounding the September 11 attacks, for example, and their effect on American patriotism and democracy (Peterson, 2007; Westheimer, 2007).

El Puente Academy in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, ties the entire school curriculum to students’ and teachers’ concerns about the community and to the way these concerns might represent dissenting views from mainstream policy. Named a New York City School of Excellence, El Puente boasts a 90 per- cent graduation rate in an area where schools usually see only 50 percent of their students graduate in four years. El Puente principal Héctor Calderón attributes the school’s success to a curriculum that engages students in efforts to realize democratic ideals of justice and equality, reverse the cycle of poverty and violence, and work toward change in their own neighborhood by closely examining and critiquing common assumptions about their surroundings. Students study environmental hazards in the area, asking difficult questions concerning decisions to locate waste incinerators in poverty-stricken areas, for example. Following that curriculum, students and teachers successfully fought a 55-story incinerator that was proposed for their neighborhood (Gonzales, 1995; North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2000; Westheimer, 2005). Jonathan Osler, a math teacher at El Puente, had students chart asthma-related hospital admissions in the area and compare it to income distributions. The students’ report became the first by a community organization to be published in a medical journal. El Puente students learn that democratic participation demands engagement with the causes of problems and exposure to multiple perspectives about solutions.

These approaches embrace dissent as they encourage students and teachers to grapple with contested issues that concern the community. They share several characteristics. First, teachers encourage students to ask questions rather than absorb pat answers. Second, teachers provide students with the information (including competing perspectives) they need to think about issues in substantive ways. Third, they root instruction in local contexts, working within their own specific surroundings and circumstances because it is not possible to teach the importance of critical thinking without providing an environment to think about.

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001: NEW YORK CITY

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I stood with my wife and daughter on a street corner 18 city blocks away from the World Trade Center and watched as the second plane hit the South tower and, soon after, as both buildings collapsed into the impossibly dense financial district streets below. Every week for months following that day, thousands of New Yorkers gathered in Union Square and Times Square and marched up Fifth Avenue, Sixth Avenue, and Broadway to warn against hasty military acts of vengeance. It was in these weekly gatherings and marches in Union Square that many New Yorkers who had lost family members, colleagues, and friends expressed their heartfelt belief that national grieving should take place immediately, but that foreign policy decisions should emerge from reasoned deliberation and debate and not from rushed emotions or political grandstanding. These weekly outpourings, which grew at times to the tens of thousands, were summarily ignored by all mainstream media outlets. And certainly in the classrooms of Dubuque, Kansas City, Chicago, and Indianapolis. The outpouring of support and solidarity from across the United States and the world was breathtaking—which is what made the subsequent inexplicable news blackouts all the more curious and hurtful.

Healthy and productive dissent is one hallmark of a mature democracy and the media should reflect such democratic goals. Educators also have a responsibility to create learning environments that help to realize the nation's finest democratic potential. The health of our democracy requires both spirit and imagination. In her controversial *New Yorker* editorial (from which I quoted at the beginning of this chapter), Susan Sontag laments the condescending rhetoric of post-9/11 political discourse. She notes that in the face of enormous complexity and historical conflict, Americans are told over and over again: "Our country is strong." Sontag finds little comfort in this repetition:

"Who doubts that America is strong? But that's not all America has to be."

NOTES

¹ United For Peace and Justice, the group that organized the protest, estimated 500,000 in attendance; the New York City Police Department (NYPD) estimated 200,000.

² See Jones (2003) and Kalb (2003) for more detail; also Westheimer (2007).

³ It is important to note that Chomsky does not imply a conspiracy, but rather an alignment of interests among a small portion of society including what Chomsky calls the “ruling elites” and the corporate owners of mainstream media.

⁴ Of the three points of fact surveyed, only 23% of those who had no perceptions about the war supported it. Among those with one of these misperceptions, 53% support the war; 78% of those who had two of the misperceptions supported the war, rising to 86% for those with all three misperceptions.

⁵ The Pentagon does not keep figures on Iraqi casualties. A 2007 study by Opinion Research Business (ORB), an independent polling group in London, estimates Iraq excess deaths to have reached 1.2 million, while an Iraqi Health Ministry survey undertaken in 2006 and 2007 estimated 400,000 excess deaths. The Hopkins study falls roughly in between these two.

⁶ See Westheimer, 2007 and Westheimer & Kahne 2003.

⁷ See also Shaffer et al., (1996). University of Virginia Health System, www.healthsystem.virginia.edu/UVAHealth/adult_mentalhealth/odd.cfm.

⁸ Marc Bousquet points out this rhetorical convergence in his blog <http://howtheuniversityworks.com/wordpress>.

⁹ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2194.html> and https://www.policyarchive.org/bitstream/handle/10207/3195/RL33936_20070323.pdf

¹⁰ See www.ahipresearch.org, *Individual Health Insurance 2006-2007: A Comprehensive Survey of Premiums, Availability, and Benefits*. AHIP Center for Policy and Research, December 2007 / C02: www.vattenfall.com/climatemap

¹¹ From National Center for Education Statistics, 2008353rev. Downloaded from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2008353rev>.

APPENDIX



Figure 1: Thousands of protesters walking right outside of Fox's headquarters.



Figure 2: Police on top of Madison Square Garden roof. Republican National Convention protest in New York City, Sunday August 29, 2004.



Figure 3: Helicopter circling above the Republican National Convention protest on Sunday August 29, 2004.



Figure 4: Live Fox Television news screen above throngs of protesters. New York City, August 29, 2004.

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