

THE 'FRAMING' OF JACQUES HEBERT:



A UNQUALIFIED BELIEF in the objectivity of news seems to belong to an earlier, more innocent age. To believe that facts and values can be neatly separated and served by media under different categories -- factual news, interpretive commentary -- strikes us now as quaint as the post-war celebration

of the "end of ideology." Impartiality in journalism seems as plausible as regarding the problems of government as technical rather than political, viewing the social sciences as value-free and accepting that professionals and managers are neutral in their decisions.

The rise of small, but vigorous "oppositional" culture in the 1960's undermined the existing faith in objectivity and neutral know-how. A critical literature proliferated which argued that much so-called expertise was part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Urban planning was shown to create slums, schools to produce illiteracy, medicine to cause illness. The epistemological status of news also became an object of debate. News, it was argued, does not reflect a reality out there, but is a social construction with its own structural limitations. The question was asked: what kind of knowledge does a news story offer? Within the new critical media sociology there have been three different, but interconnected approaches to mapping the built-in biases in journalism.

The first of these looks at the constraint imposed upon reporting by the news story form itself. The form, it is argued, incorporates its own biases quite independent of the journalist using it. Such practices as personalization, preoccupation with conflict and confrontation, abstracting events from their social and historical contexts, emphasizing ruptures in normal routines and deviant behaviour, all these are to be understood, to quote Graham Knight, "as a function of a particular methodology for knowing and not knowing the world" (1982:34). In addition the expectation that open-ended happenings can be made into news-stories requires the use of standardized narrative devices, including stock characters. News often unfolds like medieval morality plays with an updated cast: the Politician, the Activist, the Expert, the Deviant, the Victim.

The second approach focusses on how news is shaped by the routines of the news-gathering process. Through an organizational analysis of the relationship of the media and their sources, yet another pervasive bias is detected: the media depend on established elites for authoritative sources and are therefore biased towards official viewpoints. According to Gaye Tuchman, journalists find the raw material for their stories by observing the world from certain centralized sites. The "newsnet" is cast out every day to haul in the "big fish" that can be caught on the site of legitimate institutions, mostly state bureaucracies: the police headquarters, the court house, City Hall,

so deeply embedded in the dominant discourse that they have become "naturalized", invisible. Journalists, like the rest of us, acquire them through their upbringing, and they are, furthermore, reinforced by their colleagues and superiors in the news organization. The news accounts which are judged to be "objective" tacitly incorporate these assumptions.

What are these dominant values? Todd Gitlin, who has studied the framing process through a meticulous examination of the news coverage of the radical student left in *New York Times* and *CBS News* between 1965-70, has suggested that the core principles which



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the Legislature. The information acquired by reporters on these sites relies partly on the records of the organizations, records which are made selectively available to the media. Furthermore, the media itself plays a role in legitimizing these institutions. The placement of reporters on these locations reinforces the legitimacy of the organizations themselves. Tuchman, whose own work is based on observing news production both in newsrooms and television studios, concludes that through this symbiotic relationship with its sources "the activities of American news professionals are geared to maintaining the American political system as much as the work of Soviet journalists is geared to preserving that nation's political system" (1978:99-100).

The third approach -- the one most pertinent to the news analysis offered here -- looks at the substantive ideological assumptions which "frame" news accounts. There is a set of political values, it is argued, which are

form the bedrock of the hegemonic ideology are "the legitimacy of private control of commodity production; the legitimacy of technological experts; the right and ability of authorized agencies to manage conflict and make necessary reforms; the legitimacy of the social order secured and defined by dominant elites; and the value of individualism as the measure of social existence" (1980:271).

Newsworthy individuals and groups who are seen to function within this ideological consensus stand a chance of getting the even-handed treatment that professional journalism ethics refers to as "objectivity" or "fairness". At least they are taken seriously enough to become legitimate sources for their side of the story. However, those actions that seem to challenge some key hegemonic principle are not necessarily treated with the same courtesy. Critical media analysis has often focussed on such limit cases, because they offer a chance to make the invisible "frame" visible, thus demonstrating the

The Globe and Mail and the Hunger Strike

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ideological bias in news (Tuchman 1978; Gitlin 1980; Knight 1982). Strikes, demonstrations and protest marches, in particular, often bring out defensive and hostile reactions in the media. They seem to undermine the belief that social problems can be resolved within the existing institutional structures. (And they also go against the notion that violence, even symbolic violence, is only defensible when employed by the state.) Activists who challenge this conventional wisdom often get savaged by the media. If the spotlight is aimed at them, they and their causes are often trivialized or made to appear subversive, sometimes both. An analysis of a

media event. We will examine how the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's national newspaper, "framed" this event, and what effect the framing had on its news-coverage. But first some background information about Senator Hebert.

Jacques Hebert, who was appointed to the Senate in 1983, is a well-known public figure in his native province of Québec. At the age of 62 he has spent more than three decades as a writer, publisher and a political crusader for liberal social reforms. He was a founding member of the influential journal *Cite Libre*, a founder of the reform-oriented newspaper *Vrai*, he has started two publishing houses and is the

in its view, in an alarming increase in alcohol and drug abuse, prostitution and delinquency. The report which concentrated on 25% of youth it judged to be "directionless", called these people a "lost generation". It found the situation "intolerable" and its recommendations outlined a number of social policies designed to alleviate the plight of these young people. Among these was a proposal to create a community service program modelled after Katimavik. Katimavik had in the last decade provided 22,000 unemployed young people with room and board and \$1 a day for doing community work across Canada. After completing a nine-month stint, they received a \$1,000 honorarium. According to one federally commissioned study Katimavik "graduates" had an unemployment rate considerably below the national average.

Senator Hebert began his hunger strike after he had sent a letter to the Prime Minister, stating that "having exhausted all the usual democratic methods of impressing on your government the state of the crisis that exists in regard to youth, after lobbying tirelessly, but to no avail, for the reinstatement of Katimavik, I have lost confidence in your government's goodwill and seriousness towards this problem." In subsequent interviews the Senator stressed that he was fasting not only to protest the cancellation of Katimavik, but also in order to sensitize the public to the whole problem of youth.

Senator Hebert's hunger strike was a major developing story in the *Globe* between March 11 and April 1st. During this period there were 18 news accounts on the subject, 3 editorials, 5 columns, 9 letters to the editor, 11 newsphotos.

What was unusual at the onset was the amount of commentary generated by this event. The *Globe* seemed anxious to put a clear and unequivocal meaning to this political protest, to "frame" with an explicitness that comes closer to nineteenth century journalism than one has come to expect from a cooler, more detached twentieth century "quality" newspaper. The *Globe* wanted to make it abundantly clear that there was only one important issue at stake here, and that this had nothing to do with the plight of unemployed young Canadians or the demise of Katimavik. The hunger strike had to be denounced because as a tactic there was no place for it in a political democracy. It was a form of protest that could be condoned only when undertaken under regimes that were not democratic in form. It belonged to the "human rights" protests of the Soviet dissidents and oppressed colonial people, struggling for national independence and political rights. In the achieved utopia of parliamentary democracy -- already the best of all political worlds -- it could only be a sign of deep irrationality, of subversive intent. It seemed to imply that



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recent limit case in a Canadian context is offered here as evidence of how ideological "framing" works in our news media.

The *Globe* and the "Unreason" of Senator Hebert

On March 10 1986, Senator Jacques Hebert announced that he was going on a hunger strike to protest the Conservative government's decision to abolish a social program for unemployed youth that he had been instrumental in founding under the Liberal regime 10 years earlier. The government refused to reverse its decision and the Senator remained on a hunger strike for 21 days, spending his days -- and nights -- in the Senate lobby open to the public. He resumed eating only after a voluntary organization was formed by his political allies and supporters, which had the objective of finding alternative sources of funding to keep the hunger strike became a major

author of 15 books. While not as familiar a figure in English Canada, he has held many prominent federal appointments. He has spent 10 years as a commissioner of Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunication Commission, and has served as a co-chairman of a Royal Commission on Canadian culture. He is the founder of two federal youth programs, Katimavik and Canada World Youth. Most recently he has acted as a chair of the Special Senate Committee on Youth, which issued its report in February 1986. He had just returned from a cross-country tour publicizing the findings, when he learned that the Conservatives had abolished the 10 year old youth program he had founded.

The Commission report had painted a grim picture. The official unemployment rate for young adults between 15-24 was a prohibitive 17.9%, but the actual figure was judged to be even higher. Some 700,000 Canadian youths were out of work, the report estimated, and the social costs could be measured,

there were pervasive social problems that could not be resolved through the normal democratic process, by governments elected periodically by a popular vote, a thought that the *Globe* found bordered on heresy. The hunger strike, all in all, was seen by the *Globe* as a very menacing "symbolic" act.

In the eyes of the *Globe* editorial writers, then, Senator Hebert through his action had shown himself to be in a state of deepest unreason. His action is compared with a child's temper tantrum: "Mr. Hebert threatens to hold his breath until he turns blue." Former Prime Minister Trudeau is admonished for not dissuading him from his course: "We expected more from a man known for his belief in reason over emotion, and whose influence as a friend and statesman might have moderated the Senator's stand." But this breach of political etiquette was also treated, in a more serious vein, as an ideological threat. The senator was accused of indulging in "high profile intimidation." His act was called a "wrong-headed slight to the essence of parliamentary democracy," and "anti-democratic," and he was accused of "assaulting our civilized democracy as surely as if with a gun or bomb."

The columnists and guest commentators had nothing new to add to this, but the *Globe* must have decided that rhetorical overkill was not out of place in this instance. Ottawa correspondent Jeffrey Simpson devoted three entries to the subject. One was a satire imagining a capital brought to a standstill by everyone going on a hunger strike. Another column proclaims that "parliamentary democracy remains hostage to a twisted logic of a defiant man," and attacks the Liberal Leader Mr. Turner for remaining non-committal: "His refusal to condemn the tactic of a hunger strike is a bizarre abdication of leadership from a self-possessed lover of parliamentary democracy." The third column carries on substantially in the same fashion. The Maritimes correspondent George Bain reiterates: "There is nothing noble in what Senator Hebert is doing. His is the role of the terrorist, a gun to the head of the hostage, saying 'I will kill this person unless you do what I say.'" Gerald Caplan, a prominent New Democrat, was invited to give his comments, and he heaps more scorn on the fasting Senator. If the Tory Government capitulates to his demands, "it will be a black day for democracy in Canada," Caplan concludes.

What effect did this interpretation of Senator Hebert's protest have on the news stories themselves? To begin with, it determined what was not newsworthy. The *Globe* would not give Hebert the satisfaction of publicizing the issues he thought were at stake here. There were no items dealing with the high unemployment and its social costs. Katimavik itself merited only one confusing account, a review of four evaluative studies which were made to sound so contradictory in their findings that no possible conclusion would be drawn from them about the worth of the program. There were no interviews with either participants in the program or with staff in social agencies that had benefitted from their volunteer labour. Senator Hebert himself, relatively unknown to English Canadians, remained a cipher. There was no background story about his long and illustrious career as a public servant and a writer-activist, nothing that could raise uncomfortable questions about how such a public figure could overnight become a deeply irrational man and a threat to the existing political order.

The news stories that were produced tended to fall into two categories. Some concentrated on the "human interest" aspect. These included descriptions of the spectacle of a fasting Hebert on display in the Senate Lobby with crowds of tourists gawking at him, at times surrounded by youthful supporters, receiving occasional "celebrity" visitors such as the former Prime Minister Trudeau.

Into the "human interest" category could also be fitted the stories about Hebert's health, both physical and mental. There were detailed descriptions about his physical condition, interviews with the doctor whose care he was in, and speculations about how long he could survive without food. Hebert in these accounts had ceased to be a political actor and had become a "problem", a strange aberration, creating unforeseen legal and moral dilemmas. As the fast moved into the second week the question was also raised about how long he could be considered to be sound of mind. In a March 20 news item the Senate Speaker is quoted as saying that he is asking his experts to provide legal and medical advice. He expressed concern about what would happen when Hebert became so weak that one could assume that his thinking became "a bit fuzzy." Could he at that point be taken to hospital even against his own will?

The second category of news stories was more political. These accounts stressed the isolation of Senator Hebert. It was made abundantly clear that his lack of faith in the democratic process was not shared by any reputable figure or group. The governing Tories had refused to bow down to his "intimidation". Neither the Liberal



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party nor the New Democrats were endorsing this form of protest. There was no French-English split on this issue: the most eminent French Canadian news commentators were said to deplore the Senator's act. It was also made public that two major national lobby groups for youth had urged him to end his fast. While acknowledging that Hebert had received some encouragement from individual Liberal MPs, the accounts stressed that even such personal friends of Hebert as Pierre Trudeau and former cabinet minister Jean Chretien, who were standing by him, supported his individual "natural rights" to act according to his conscience rather than the form his dissent was taking. Chretien -- a moving force behind the voluntary organization established to raise funds to keep Katimavik afloat -- is quoted as saying: "The question for me was if one man is willing to die for what he believes in, am I willing to stand up and lend support to save his life and turn it into something positive." In the same issue (April 1) another quote is offered from the Liberal Leader to drive home, once more, just how uncomfortable Hebert's own party was about his protest. "It is not the typically Canadian act," says Turner "Very curious, very strange in our political history. I don't know if I have a right to make a judgement of it."

Thus the news stories directly or indirectly supported the editorial judgement that Senator Hebert was not involved in a legitimate form of political protest, but was acting from some perhaps unfathomable irrational impulse. The accompanying news photos tended to give visual enforcement to this "frame". There were altogether 12 photos of Hebert connected with the hunger strike coverage, and in none of them does he look like a dignified public figure whose political protest one could take very seriously. There is no rational elder statesman here, but rather a frail, emotional, vulnerable individual, visibly getting weaker as the fast continues, raising indeed the question in the mind of the reader as to how long he can be judged responsible for his actions. In many pictures he looks despondent, despairing, almost apathetic, others catch a lighter moment and show him playing with his grandson or joking -- in his stocking feet -- with young supporters. In one picture he looks like he is praying. In three photos he is shown in affectionate interaction with a young child: one does get the impression that he is a compassionate man, who cares about young people. On the other hand, the pictures also convey the visual message that outside his personal influential friends such as Trudeau and Chretien,

who each pose with him, Hebert's supporters are young and without any political clout. There are no images here that inspire confidence in Senator Hebert. And none that indicate any groundswell of support. What is missing, for instance, is any photo documentation of the fact that Hebert during this period addressed large crowds of supporters on Parliament Hill.

Is the judgement the *Globe* coverage presents on Senator Hebert, then, completely monolithic? What about such journalistic virtues as "objectivity", "balance", "fairness"? Hebert did have some support in the *Globe* -- in the Letters to the Editor column. Of eight published letters six were sympathetic to the Senator. Several even took exception to the *Globe* view of democracy. On March 22 one contributor asks: "Isn't it clear by now that the Mulroney government is sensitive to political pressure, whether from senior citizens or from U.S. based interests? If Senator Hebert, by taking a very personal action on behalf of unemployed youth, can threaten conservative seats in Québec, it seems to have everything to do with parliamentary democracy." Another correspondent writes on March 27: "Mr. Hebert has every right to take his plea to the people. We are, after all, the ultimate bulwark of those rules and laws that make our political system work," concluding that "By the way, that democracy argument is the same one used behind the Iron Curtain to control dissidents we applaud here in the West."

However, it is one of the two critical letters that is singled out for visual emphasis. A March 19 contribution is boxed in, given a large headline, "Misguided Ploy", and augmented with a photo of a dishevelled looking Hebert lying in his sleeping bag on the Senate floor.

There was also another cautious gesture towards "objectivity." On April 1, after Hebert had renounced his hunger strike, Rabbi Gunther Plaut, a frequent guest commentator, was invited to close off the discussion on the meaning of Hebert's protest. He reserved judgement about the senator, writing, "Mr. Hebert may be a fool, as some say. And then maybe not. Morality, if it comes to play, often wears a foolish coat." However, Plaut does acknowledge that a contradiction can develop between values based on parliamentary democracy and the right of an individual to act according to his conscience. In certain limited circumstances the hunger strike can be used, even in a political democracy, as a legitimate moral and political weapon, Plaut argues. And he maintains that there are no hard and fast rules about this. No matter what poor judgement Hebert might have shown in fasting for Katimavik and the unemployed youth in Canada, he had not, in Plaut's view, committed the ultimate ideological heresy of stepping outside the consensual values that Gitlin referred to as the "hegemonic frame". After weeks of overkill, the case is closed with this faint exoneration.

A subsequent *Globe* news story is worth mentioning as a postscript. On April 14, two weeks after Senator Hebert had disappeared from the media lime-light, the *Globe* ran a story about imminent changes in a federal drug law that would give brand-name manufacturers a 10 year monopoly, with no strings attached, eliminating in many cases, the choice between brand-name and considerably cheaper generic drugs for the public. According to the research, quoted by the *Globe* columnist Hugh Windsor in the same issue, this legislation could raise drug prices by as much as 100 percent. Unlike Senator Hebert's hunger strike, the fact that the federal cabinet was expected to cave in to the demands of the multinational drug companies, to the detriment of what the *Globe* considered "the public good," was not portrayed by the *Globe* -- which was critical of this measure -- as an act that seriously undermined the functioning of parliamentary democracy. It was back to business as usual.

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