The Compelling Story of the White/Western Activist in the War Zone: Examining Race, Neutrality, and Exceptionalism in Citizen Journalism

Gada Mahrouse
Concordia University

Abstract: This article explores the racialized dimensions of the witnessing, documenting and reporting practices of White/Western activists. Drawing from in-depth interviews conducted with Canadian activists who have travelled mainly to Palestine and Iraq to report on the effects of military violence, it considers how racialized power is (re)produced through their practices. The article weaves postcolonial feminist theory, scholarship on citizenship journalism and narrative data. It explores several pitfalls that activists encounter in their representational practices, showing how easily and frequently they slide into a position of dominance. It asserts the need for an ongoing critique of the taken-for-granted virtues of “alternative” or “independent” media practices by nonprofessional or “citizen” journalists. Specifically, it challenges the prevalent notion that citizen journalism is a sure means to subvert power relations.

Keywords: The politics of voice; Whiteness; Race & representational practices; North-South; Postcolonial theory

Résumé : Cet article explore les dimensions raciales des témoignages, documentations et reportages provenant de militants blancs/occidentaux. Se fondant sur des entrevues en profondeur avec des militants canadiens qui ont voyagé principalement en Palestine et en Iraq pour rendre compte des effets de la violence militaire, il évalue la manière dont leurs pratiques (re)produisent le pouvoir racial. Pour ce faire, l’article combine la théorie féministe postcoloniale, la recherche sur le journalisme citoyen, et des données narratives. Il explore plusieurs déficiences apparaissant dans les pratiques représentationnelles des militants, montrant combien il est facile et commun pour ceux-ci d’adopter une position de prédominance par rapport à leurs sujets. Il met l’accent sur le besoin d’une critique en continu des pratiques médiatiques « alternatives » ou « indépendantes » propres aux journalistes citoyens ou non professionnels. Plus précisément, il met en question l’idée conventionnelle que le journalisme citoyen soit une manière sûre de subvertir les rapports de pouvoir.

Gada Mahrouse is Assistant Professor at the Simone de Beauvoir Institute, Concordia University, where she teaches courses on feminisms, race, and postcolonialism. Email: gada.mahrouse@concordia.ca

©2009 Canadian Journal of Communication Corporation
Increasingly, social justice activists from Western countries such as Canada are travelling to conflict zones to gather and disseminate reports on people who live in conditions of violence and repression. Acting as citizen journalists, these activists seek to challenge social injustices and summon political pressure from the West. Being physically present at the geopolitical site of conflict enables the activists to offer eyewitness testimonials and report on the conditions first-hand. In so doing, they try to relay information that is not readily available in mainstream Western media. Typically, the information they disseminate are moving accounts of the horrors they witness daily and the experiences of the local people they encounter. Many post reports through independent and alternative media while working with mainstream media at the same time.

This article explores the racialized dimensions, in particular the reproduction of “whiteness,” that are present in the witnessing, documenting, and reporting practices of such activists. Drawing from in-depth interviews with Canadians who have travelled mainly to Palestine and Iraq, my discussion considers the ways in which racialized power is (re)produced through their practices. It asserts the need for an ongoing critique of the taken-for-granted virtues of “alternative” or “independent” media practices by nonprofessional journalists, hereafter referred to as “citizen journalism.” Specifically, it challenges the prevalent notion that citizen journalism is a means through which power relations are necessarily subverted.

The discussion is presented in two parts. The first part describes four key themes that emerged from the activists’ narratives regarding their racialized roles as citizen journalists: 1) a tendency among media to focus on the activists and the danger they face; 2) the ways in which the activists are presumed by others or by themselves to have an aptitude for objectivity and neutrality; 3) a presumption of independence and innocence; and 4) the dilemmas of “voice” faced by some of the activists.

In the second half of the article, I present an analytical discussion of these themes. Drawing from select studies on citizen journalism and war correspondence, as well as theoretical perspectives on representational practices, I consider how whiteness—defined here as a relational positioning (Frankenberg, 1993; Dyer, 1997; Morrison, 1993)—is negotiated and/or reproduced in this type of transnational citizen journalism. I argue that the counter-hegemonic political potential of the activists’ documenting and reporting practices is largely constrained. I also consider the implications of circulating the activists’ “alternative” perspectives within existing mainstream media. The article ends with a brief discussion of the implications of this analysis and reflects on the challenges of doing media work across asymmetrical racialized power relations.

**Four emergent themes**

**A focus on the activists and the danger they face**

A common reporting strategy employed by some of the activists was to set up media coverage of themselves in advance of their travel, for example, arranging...
to be interviewed by news reporters in their hometowns. One activist who went to Palestine explained that he had programmed the phone number of the producers of a Canadian news radio program into his cellphone so that he could contact them immediately after violence began. The effectiveness of this pre-arranged contact with Canadian media was proven, in his view, after it allowed him to instantly report an incident where shots were being fired at civilian protestors. He said that the sound of live machine guns gave further credibility to his report, which was taped and aired later.

The significance of the gunfire was echoed by another activist who said that he “became famous” when, for a few days, his family could not reach him in Palestine:

My daughter got panicky and called [a Canadian newspaper] and said, ‘my dad is lost in Palestine. Last time we heard of him he was in Ramallah in Arafat’s compound.’ Well this sounded like a human interest story so this reporter got a hold of me in Balata and interviewed me. . . . She called a couple of times, and the tank firing could be heard in the background of the house we were staying in. When I got back there was a photographer and reporter to interview me about the trip.

The subtext of this story—and several other similar ones—is that an extraordinary Canadian left a family and a comfortable, privileged life to help others, even at the risk of coming face-to-face with great danger.

Recognizing the potential of activist-centred news stories to bring attention to issues of social justice, many of the activists claimed to use this attention strategically. One activist referred to this as playing up the “local boy does good” angle. Despite this self-conscious, pragmatic approach, however, some activists were uneasy with the fact that certain incidents were only reported because they were there. One example is Alex, who explained that although he had only a peripheral role as someone who went to Central America to support a local activist who had long been “on the front lines” of organizing efforts, he was the one the media took most interest in. In other words, his efforts to publicize the oppressive conditions faced by some people in that region were overshadowed by the story of a Canadian activist who went there to help. Alex said this was most evident when, upon returning to Canada, he was met at the airport by what he described as “a circus” of cameras and reporters, all wanting to interview him about his experience. In contrast, when one of his Central American colleagues returned to Canada (where she had been living), she received very little media attention. Alex attributed this to “the importance of the passport and the white skin” and conceded that it was “the only way to get coverage.”

Objectivity, neutrality, and the capacity for discerning truths

The activists also spoke of assuming, in interviews, the roles of objective observers or authorities. In general, they said they were perceived by Western media to be more knowing or trustworthy than the local people and were frequently asked by media to comment on the politics of situations that, in many cases, they knew little about. For example, after being in Palestine for only a few days, some were approached by journalists who wanted to interview them about
their views on the whether the violence is justified. Many of the activists who were interviewed spoke about difficult negotiations around their positioning as spokespeople or authorities. This was further complicated by the impression that the media would approach Western activists instead of local people because, as one activist put it, “we were white like them.” Where possible, a few activists adopted a guiding principle whereby, rather than making statements to the press, they would try to refer journalists to a local person.

Other activists, however, took on a spokesperson role uncritically. Many of the activists believed themselves to be non-partisan, objective observers who may have been able to give more accurate and less biased accounts than local observers. This became evident when some activists described the frustration of feeling manipulated by people on various sides of a conflict and having to do “guesswork” to determine what was true. Judith explains:

One event happens and we would get as many stories about what happened as people that were there, depending on what they wanted you to know.

Another activist conflated wanting to offer an “alternative” perspective (the one not usually presented in the mainstream media) with having a particular ability to discern and tell truths. As she put it, given their commitment to working towards ending violence, activists are “truth-tellers... in a world where that kind of truth doesn’t always want to be heard.”

In their enthusiastic attempts to get at the truth, some activists naively asked inappropriate questions or questions that could put people at risk. One activist named Dan described a particularly volatile time in Palestine when people suspected of being terrorists or “freedom fighters” were being arrested and gave an example of how tactlessly and inappropriately some activists attempted to gather information:

People were on edge and they were particularly distrustful of any new faces around. And some activists would stick cameras in their faces and ask them things like, “are you a freedom fighter?”

Dan explained that, at the time, this type of behaviour had escalated tensions to the point where Palestinian people in the community wanted those activists to leave. Furthermore, the trouble with such crude reporting practices, according to him, was that they hindered other members of his group who had approached the community sensitively and made efforts to build their trust.

Anticipating another trend in news coverage, several activists who had gone to Iraq in 2003, at the start of the war, tried to collect personal stories from “ordinary” Iraqis. Listening to what ordinary people were saying and observing what effects the war was having on the everyday lives of Iraqis was believed to valuable in the service of, as one activist put it, “exposing the official lies and spin that rely on distance and doubt to obscure the bloody realities of war”.

To this end, the above mentioned group of activists went to Iraq with the goal of interviewing as many Iraqis as possible. After a few days of trying to arrange interviews, however, they quickly realized that people were nervous about talking to them and reluctant to answer certain questions about the political situation in Iraq. Therefore, in an effort to document less guarded perspec-
tives, they approached their work more informally, opting not to use a microphone, and instead jotting down notes while socializing in a coffee shop or over a game of chess.

**The presumed independence and innocence of anti-war “guerrilla” journalism**

This section focuses on the narrative of one Canadian activist, whom I will call Jerry, who went to Iraq as part of The Iraq Peace Team. The website of the Iraq Peace Team (IPT) explicitly states that American-dominated, Western media impede the truth from reaching North Americans. According to the website, that is the reason why IPT members “see their role partly as guerrilla journalists, disseminating their grounds-eye view of the war to an ever-expanding network of e-mail contacts and alternative press outlets” (IPT, 2007, italics added). Jerry joined the Iraq Peace Team because he was drawn to the idea of documenting and disseminating information, a role he had previously undertaken in various other efforts of citizen journalism.

Like some of the activists mentioned earlier, Jerry set up a relationship with CBC Radio, a mainstream Canadian media outlet, before he went. He explained that CBC Radio was one of the first organizations he and his teammates approached because he had done some freelance work with them before and therefore had “some connections there.” Jerry and his colleagues believed that this would enable them to reach a much wider audience than they could using alternative media. By setting it up in advance, Jerry reasoned that the CBC would know who they were and why they were there, and would be prepared to interview them on short notice. Jerry said that although he and his teammates were apprehensive at first, concerned about how reporters at the CBC would react to their ideas, they were pleasantly surprised with how “open” and receptive they were and felt very supported and encouraged by them. In practical terms, the support they received from the CBC included the use of recording equipment and space on the CBC website for posting diary entries.

In their preliminary meetings, Jerry and his teammates were told that the CBC was not interested in getting their political analyses, but instead wanted them to report personal stories about ordinary Iraqis trying to survive and function in Iraq. They were told that since, under the circumstances, the Iraqis could not communicate their stories themselves, the activists could share those stories for them.

Two significant ideas emerge from Jerry’s narrative. The first relates to his belief that, as an activist, he has more independence and is freer from censure. Indeed, Jerry imagined himself to be an independent reporter functioning outside of the knowledge production structures of mainstream media. That he was not paid or otherwise compensated (Jerry and his teammates raised funds for their trip and took time off from their jobs to travel to Iraq) strengthened his belief in his independence, despite the fact that he had CBC’s “unofficial” sponsorship.

The second salient feature of Jerry’s narrative is that it reveals that he saw himself not only as freer, but also more righteously motivated than professional journalists. For instance, he explained that he arrived in Iraq a month and a half before the bombing started and saw hundreds of journalists from around the world “waiting and hoping that a war would start”: 
They were just aching to send anything back home that was newsworthy. And I would say [to myself], my goodness, is this what it comes to? You hope for a tragedy, a crisis like this?

What enabled Jerry to differentiate himself from other journalists were his “activist” intentions and his mandate to report on the lives of ordinary Iraqis. In other words, he believed that because his position was explicitly anti-war, he would be able to transcend sensationalism and be more attuned to the day-to-day effects of the impending war.

The distinction he made between collecting stories as an activist and collecting stories as a journalist was unclear to me, so I asked him to clarify. He replied:

> Journalists were not coming in as anti-war activists. . . . They came in without a preconceived idea of why they were there, most of them. Or they came in with mixed opinions, mixed perspectives. . . . We had an agenda coming in. We had a prescriptive idea of why we were there, what function we would serve, what kinds of messages we were looking at.

Conceding that “everybody has a bias” and explicitly rejecting the notion of neutrality in journalism, he emphasized that what set him and his teammates apart was that their bias was “upfront.” Another major difference for him was his authorial intention of being “for peace” or “anti-war” which, in his view, distinguished his actions as virtuous.

The dilemma of speaking for the Other

The fourth theme that emerged pertains to the questions of voice that emerge among citizen journalists who are working in solidarity. This theme was exemplified best in the narrative of “Sarah,” another Canadian activist who travelled to Iraq. Sarah travelled with an organization called Christian Peacemaker Team (CPT). Compared to other human rights and solidarity groups in Iraq at the time of the war, the CPT had a long-established presence in Baghdad and was well respected by Iraqis. It was therefore especially well-positioned to attract media attention in order to publicize these issues. In fact, the CPT has been credited with a leading role in documenting and publicizing the detention of an estimated 14,000 Iraqis without due process (Adamson, 2006). Furthermore, in January 2004, the CPT held a press conference on its findings regarding abuse in Iraqi prisons, four months before the Abu Ghraib prison scandal broke out in mainstream media (Scrivener, 2006). Sarah explained that one of the central roles she and her teammates played in Iraq was to document the arrests and detention of Iraqis by U.S. military forces and the effects this had on the detainees’ families. As well, she and her team members acted as intermediaries between Iraqis and the occupying U.S. forces.

What makes Sarah’s experience and perspective interesting for this discussion relates to her previous CPT activism with Aboriginal people in New Brunswick, Canada, where she had already faced a dilemma concerning representation and voice. She explained that in an attempt to minimize racialized power relations, the official position of the CPT in its work with indigenous communities in Canada was to avoid making any statements to the media. Instead, CPT activists were encouraged to respond to media by referring reporters to an
Aboriginal person because, she said, “colonialism removes the voice of the subject people. . . . for years Aboriginal people have been spoken for.” Yet, in Iraq, she said found herself in a context which called for a different approach:

But I have to say, I wouldn’t want to generalize this notion of “speaking for” to all of our work, because with the Aboriginal groups, it is absolutely imperative not to speak for. But for Iraq, it was different.

She explained that, at the time, many Iraqis were desperate to get information about missing family members. Yet, since American soldiers stationed in Iraq often refused to speak directly to Iraqis, the activists would use their White/Western privilege to try and obtain information on their behalf. Sarah said that she believed using her racialized positioning as a White/Western person for “getting the ear” of the Americans was the right thing to do. Sarah said that she and her teammates reconciled their positioning as Iraqi spokespersons by constantly consulting Iraqis.

Although Sarah described her role in these contexts as “fraught,” she said there was no other way that Iraqis and American soldiers would come together. With some reservations, Sarah and her teammates believed that if they proceeded cautiously, they could turn their privileged positioning into a meaningful and effective gesture of solidarity.

Representational practices & whiteness as a racialized positioning

It goes without saying that intentions behind the citizen journalism explored here are admirable. These activists put to use the mobility, resources, and authority they have as Westerners to raise attention and compassion for people targeted by military violence. It is hard to disagree that such efforts are especially needed in light of the dominant discourses that have surrounded the Middle East in recent years. As many scholars have shown (Hage, 2003; Jiwani 2006; Karim, (2003); Razack, 2005), the racialized media depictions of Arab and Muslim communities since 2001 are more blatant and dangerous than ever, resulting in, as Judith Butler (2004) points out, little room for the expression of non-binaristic thinking about current global conflicts. This critical examination of these narratives is not meant to eclipse the worthy intentions of these activists. Rather, in the spirit of advancing the goals of social justice activism, the critical race analysis that follows seeks to reveal some of the less obvious ways in which racialized power can pervade such representational practices.

Foregrounding this discussion are the writings of theorists who have made evident the connections between practices of representation and the relations of racialized power and knowledge that they produce (Hall, 1997; Said, 1978). Following this theoretical trajectory, the practices examined here are understood as being both embedded in power relations and constitutive of them. In other words, it is not only that such representational practices fail to challenge existing power relations, but that racialized power is (re) created through them. Furthermore, as Grewal and Kaplan (1996) point out, the questions of representational practices raised in this article are especially important to consider because they are an example of how practices of knowledge production are intended to be a form of resistance.
Regarding racialized power relations, my analysis is mainly concerned with the contextual ways in which whiteness operates and, in particular, its historical patterns and continuities. The concept of whiteness, as it is used here, is therefore understood as a fluid, constructed, and produced identity (Dyer, 1997; Hall, 1992; Morrison, 1993), one that pertains mainly to a set of national identities and their incumbent notions of civility (Hage, 1998). Furthermore, the term “Western” is similarly defined here as a relational positioning (Hall, 1997).

At the same time, since the focus of this study is an activist strategy that centres on a politics of physical presence, it is also informed by theories on the ways physical bodies are read (Ahmed, 2000). The formulation of whiteness used here is captured in Richard Dyer’s (1997) claim that the embodiment of whiteness involves “something that is in but not of the body” (p. 14). Ruth Frankenberg’s (1993) definition of whiteness is also instrumental to this analysis insofar as she defines whiteness as “a complexly constructed product of local, regional, national, and global relations, past and present,” and one that is co-constructed with a range of other racial and cultural categories, such as class and gender (p. 236). She emphasizes, however, that this co-construction is “fundamentally asymmetrical” because whiteness is always a position of dominance, normativity and privilege (pp. 236-237).

Viewed through this conceptual lens, how might one understand the racialized dimensions of the citizen journalism practices described above? While recognizing that citizen journalism may have the potential to disrupt the “us” and “them” dichotomies that otherwise permeate mainstream reporting (Allan, Sonwalkar, & Carter, 2007), a critical race lens demands that one begins by interrogating the exclusionary limits of who can safely and effectively take part in such reporting. Certainly, in critically examining citizen journalism, a question that arises immediately is “who gains access to the lives of strangers, who is allowed into their space, and whose documentable knowledge of the strangers hence expands?”(Ahmed, 2000, p. 68). Further underpinning this interrogation are the racialized aspects of embodied presence. By this I am referring to the dynamic that I refer to as “the compelling story of the White/Western activist in the war zone.” As I have shown, when activists succeed at drawing the attention of mainstream media or the Western public, it is usually them, and not the site of the conflict they are in, that become the focal points of the story. In many cases, activists who appear in human interest stories are asked about their own intentions, the reactions of their own families and are held up as exemplars of global citizenship. Underpinning these stories is an inference that the person most likely to draw publicity from a Western audience is also, by necessity, a Western person.

Moreover, underlying the fact that gunfire lends credibility to their reports is an unspoken presumption about the inequality between Western and non-Western lives. What makes the efforts undertaken by these activists so compelling, according to Didier Fassin (2007), is that by “exposing themselves to danger,” they concretely and immediately challenge the inequality between lives. As Fassin explains, their experiences are newsworthy because of the “sacredness” attached to their lives, as compared to the sacrificial lives of the local civilians (p. 514). Along with this sacredness comes a high profile that, in turn, garners access to
international media. A focus on the activist also raises important questions on how the White/Western activist is, as Morrison (1993) points out, propped up by the shadow figures of the people they report on, people who are presented as “dead, impotent, or under complete control” (p. 33).

One of the racialized dynamics that makes this activism necessary and effective is that White/Western activists are taken to be rational actors who are fair-minded about the politics of the region. To put it differently, and borrowing from Dyer, (1997) unlike the inherently biased people from the regions they are reporting on, these activists are seen as “‘just’ human” (p. 539). From the excerpts above, it is clear that some of the activists saw themselves this way, believing themselves to be objective observers, capable of less biased accounts than the local people. Such displays of authority seem to mimic the role of what Sara Ahmed (2000) calls the “all-knowing stranger” (p. 73). This positioning also reflects what Zulaika (2004) has referred to as an “ironic predicament” because although the public is interested in hearing their accounts, and they are positioned as experts, often what little they know about their situation comes from the local people they are speaking about and whom they are supposed to be representing. In many instances, the activists’ narratives reveal that they understand themselves to be intrinsically equipped for the role of neutral observer and reporter. Furthermore, if one pays attention to how the activists explained their political and moral commitments (Davies and Harré 2001), it becomes evident that some understood themselves to be arbiters of trustworthiness and automatically assumed the role of a judge or truth arbiter. Their determination to obtain the truth, however well-intentioned, resulted in an “investigative tenor” (Jean-Klein, 2002), insofar as they often doubted what they were being told and felt the need to discern the authenticity of the personal stories they heard. Most helpful for the purposes of understanding this dynamic is Said’s (1978) observation that racialized binaries “naturally” set up the Westerner not only as a spectator, but also as a judge of the Others’ behaviour (p. 109). In this sense, the activists’ presence is imbued with a racialized function of surveillance and a measure of accountability.

What is significant here is not whether they were in fact being told the truth. Rather, it is the notable absence of a critical understanding of how, as Jean-Klein (2002) has pointed out, such documenting practices are “hierarchical, paternalistic and coercive exercises which ideologically cloak these aspects of themselves” (p. 50). Certainly, this could be said of the group of activists in Iraq who, as a means of overcoming people’s reluctance to be interviewed by them, approached people more informally, and in social situations. Following Jean-Klein, I contend that their determined approach, however well intentioned, was not only paternalistic and coercive but that it also raises ethical questions about informed consent.

What could also be gleaned from the interviews was that the activists who were attuned to the asymmetrical character of their roles as citizen journalists justified this positioning through their participation in “alternative” or “independent” journalism, as well as their anti-war stance. In other words, discourses of exceptionalism could easily be detected in some of their narratives. This was clearly evident in Jerry’s narrative, insofar as his is a rich example for considering the presumed independence and innocence of citizen journalism. In fact, the proud
way that Jerry described his work directly echoed much of the literature on citizen journalism, which largely identifies the practice as a means through which power will change hands and marginalized voices will be heard (Allan, Sonwalkar, & Carter 2007). For example, in his book, We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People (2004), Gillmor offers many examples that persuasively illustrate how the Internet enables people to speak out and access a diversity of news and opinions. Although Gillmor concedes that at present, grassroots journalists are comprised of elite Westerners (p. xvii-xviii) he argues that the citizen journalism phenomenon “will give new voice to people who’ve felt voiceless” (p. xviii). His overall contention is that journalism is becoming more grassroots, democratic, and pluralistic. Moreover, he argues that the communication network will become “a medium for everyone’s voice” (p. xiii). Similarly, in undertaking journalism work as an activist, Jerry clearly perceived himself to be outside of mainstream and hegemonic knowledge production practices. Jerry was unsettled by the violent intrigue that war journalists depend on, and described the attitudes of most mainstream reporters with disdain, accusing them of feeding off crises to send good stories home. What enabled him to differentiate himself from professional journalists were his “activist” intentions. He believed that because he was explicitly anti-war, he was able to transcend the seduction of sensationalism.

In many ways, Jerry’s narrative exemplified those of many of the activists I interviewed, which squarely corresponded with what Tilley and Cokley (2008) refer to as the “three main mythological meta-narratives” (p. 108) around citizen journalism: the myth of the Robinson Crusoe Citizen, the myth of the Noble Citizen, and the Myth of Perfect Plurality. These citizen journalists understood their practices within a false dichotomy in which citizens speak the truth, while commercial media do not. Tilley and Cokley explain further:

The discourse from citizen journalists about citizen journalism suggests it provides greater truthfulness, less bias, more open access to information, more ‘freedom’ to report what is seen, and greater plurality of perspectives, especially counter-hegemonic perspectives (p. 103).

Yet several studies on journalism have refuted this claim. For instance, in her study of Iraq war weblogs that were posted in the spring of 2003, Melissa Wall (2006) found that despite the fact that they saw themselves participating in an alternative and independent medium, the representations of the war by bloggers did not differ much from those in mainstream media. This false sense of independence and freedom from censure exists in mainstream journalism as well. Writing about foreign war correspondents, Pedelty (1995) points out that although most see themselves as maverick investigators who set out to uncover hidden truths, they have no more freedom than conventional journalists.

Studies on the production of documentaries in public broadcasting add insights and raise further questions about the independence of the citizen journalism evident in Jerry’s narrative, especially with respect to the blurred distinction as to whether he was working for and not merely with the CBC (albeit as a volunteer). Indeed, a historical study of the broadcast tradition in Canada by David Hogwarth (2002) reveals that since the mid-1930s, broadcasters had come to view documentary programming as a uniquely efficient way of telling stories
about the nation. Keenly aware of the costs involved in the production of documentary features, broadcasters developed new technologies and equipment specifically designed to cover “events where they happened and when they happened” (p. 24). Hogwarth writes:

Only by means of a “documentary factory,” according to some program supervisors, could the corporation produce the enormous and steady volume of material required by its public service mandate. (p. 23)

Moreover, he explains that when dealing with “controversial issues,” they sought to cover a range of views while “not themselves expressing an opinion” (p. 24). This suggests that the opportunity, which the CBC granted Jerry and his teammates, was not unique, but a common and economically efficient practice that has long been in use. By having an activist such as Jerry broadcast his reports from Iraq, the CBC arguably covered the requisite anti-war point of view for a “balanced” newscast in a very cost-efficient way. While Jerry saw the CBC helping him to achieve his goals, Hogwarth’s (2002) study suggests that it was more likely to have been the other way around—he was helping the CBC.

That the CBC is the main public broadcasting network in Canada also raises significant questions about national identity. For one thing, Dornfeld’s (1998) work reveals that the production of public broadcasting shares a great deal with processes that Benedict Anderson (1991) identified when describing nations as “imagined communities” (p. 61). Furthermore, as a Crown Corporation, it is important to note that the CBC was created in an effort to resist U.S. cultural domination of Canadian media and has therefore always served as a major instrument of the production of Canadian culture (Herman & McChesney, 1997). Thus, if one accepts the view that the representations of “public affairs” are never outside of the dominant force of the state (Hackett, 1991), then one must question the subversive potential of the reporting practices of activists like Jerry. In offering this analysis, I aim to illustrate that, despite his commitments, he cannot be assumed to have escaped interpellation by the state.

Lastly, in exploring issues of voice and who speaks for whom, Sarah’s experience demonstrates that the material conditions of a particular geopolitical context make a situated activist practice necessary. Her narrative shows that a fixed set of “do’s and don’ts” for activists who are acting as citizen journalists is inappropriate because it can lead to a misguided understanding of what it means to use Western privilege effectively. It also highlights the paradox that would arise if, in a situation like Iraq, activists refused to become spokespersons for local people on the basis of some fixed notion of what an antiracist practice entails. In other words, had Sarah and her teammates refused that role on the basis of an abstracted antiracist principle of refusing to speak for the Other, they would have been of little help to the Iraqi people who, within the violent conditions of war and occupation, could not access information nor be heard.

To reflect on these larger questions about the politics of “voice,” it helps to draw from feminist scholars who have long demanded that attention be paid to the effects of domination and subjugation that result from speaking. For instance, it helps to recall Ella Shohat’s (2002) contention that “voice” can be effectively used in achieving solidarity. She writes:
Rather than ask who can speak, we should ask what are the different modes of speech to explore in our own future work. While it is hazardous to “speak for someone,” that is paradigmatically to replace them, it is different to speak up for, or to speak alongside. (p. 177)

Similarly, Sara Ahmed’s (2000) discussion of feminist ethnography has particular resonance for these questions insofar as she offers ways of thinking about efforts to avoid dominant imperialist positioning. She clarifies that the most significant question is not whose voices can speak, but whose voices can be heard. Drawing from Spivak (1988), and extending Mary Louise Pratt’s (1986) discussion of imperialist ventures into foreign spaces, Ahmed challenges the idea that the best way to avoid speaking for others is to avoid speaking at all. Ahmed argues that such a position is a form of cultural relativism that functions, paradoxically, to confirm the privilege of those who are refusing to speak. Ahmed’s point is a persuasive one for this discussion because it shows that to unreflectively assume a position of silence can defeat antiracist intentions. Instead of shallow understandings and simplistic solutions, what these scholars call for is a complex understanding of the effects of power that emerge through practices of speech.

Summary and implications
In highlighting some limitations of certain citizen journalism practices, this critique is premised upon the belief that social justice interventions must be continuously and critically examined. I have argued that the counter-hegemonic political potential of the activists’ documenting and reporting practices is largely constrained. Through an analysis of the activists’ efforts to document, disseminate, and speak for the Other, I have illustrated that because these practices maintain a racialized hierarchy—one that is somewhat hidden by notions of neutrality and exceptionalism. In exploring several pitfalls that activists encounter in their representational practices, I have also shown that despite the activists’ good intentions, as Westerners who are inscribed with authority and neutrality, they easily and frequently slide into a position of dominance. Undeniably, the ascendency of whiteness keeps the activists at the centre of the reporting and documenting efforts in which they engage. Furthermore, they maintain a hierarchical positioning as experts and as objective truth-tellers, in ways that reproduce power relations rather than challenge them.

The claim that citizen journalism practices of this kind are not necessarily subversive raises the complex question about the representational practices of Western activists within social justice movements. The analysis presented here refutes the simplistic resolution that people with Western privilege must not participate in such practices. Instead, in examining up close some of the contradictions that arise in citizen journalism efforts, it aims to identify some of the nuanced ways in which relations of racialized power might be better negotiated in specific circumstances. Indeed, I have sought to hold in tension two seemingly opposite perspectives. On the one hand, I have offered examples that illustrate how racialized power relations are often reinstated through citizen journalism practices. On the other hand, the example of Sarah’s narrative, coupled with a theoretical discussion of the politics of voice, shows that Western activists can respond in ways that are responsible and useful. In considering the politics of
voice, this article also illustrated how contextually specific judgements and practices are necessary, but difficult for activists to negotiate. Most importantly, it suggested that activists must carefully consider the complex ways in which their practices may inadvertently reproduce the very relations they seek to disrupt.

Notes
1. Fifteen interviews were conducted between March and May of 2005 with Canadian activists who had travelled with groups including: International Women’s Peace Service (IWPS) [http://www.iwps.info/en/index.php]; the Ecumenical Accompaniment or Monitoring program organized by the United Church of Canada (EAPPI or EA) [http://www.anglican.ca/index.htm]; Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) [http://www.cpt.org]; the International Solidarity movement (ISM) [http://www.palsolidarity.org]; the Guatemala Accompaniment Project [http://www.nisgua.org/home.asp]; Peace Brigades International (PBI) [http://www.peacebrigades.org]; and the Iraq Peace Team (IPT) [http://vitw.org/mp].
2. The term is used broadly here to refer to the publicizing of political events by nonprofessional journalists. It is important to state from the outset, however, that the term “citizen journalism” can be misleading insofar as the activists with whom this article is concerned do not necessarily fit into the category of “accidental journalists” whose reports are considered to be the “spontaneous actions of ordinary people” (Allan, Sonwalker, & Carter, 2007, p. 374, 378). Rather, working with NGOs or other civil society organizations, these activists go to war zones with the explicit purpose of gathering and disseminating reports.
3. To examine the relational and discursive aspects of whiteness as a racialized positioning, I adopt Davies and Harré’s (2001) methodological approach, which pays attention to the ways in which people are positioned in discursive practices and the way in which the individual’s subjectivity is generated through various positionings (p. 261). Davies and Harré contend that how we make sense of the world and who we take ourselves to be involves several processes, including positioning of self in terms of categories and story lines. The main tenet of this methodology as it applies to the discussion that follows is to examine the activists’ narratives for what they understand their actual or metaphorical role to be. Importantly, these processes of discursive positioning are not necessarily intentional.
4. The majority, though not all, of the activists interviewed for this study self-identified as White (12 of the 15). However, I use the term “whiteness” to describe all of them because as Westerners who carry the Canadian passport, in those geopolitical contexts, the activists of colour also came to represent whiteness, albeit to a lesser degree (for more on this see Mahrouse 2009). Furthermore, “Western” primarily refers to a discursive status rather than a geographical space. As Frankenberg points out, in the geographical sense, the “West” is of course a relative term that tends to be understood to refer to capitalist European countries, North America, Australia, New Zealand and, on occasion, Japan (Frankenberg, 1993). Thus, in describing the activists as “Western”, I am referring to the notion of the West as a political and economic agenda that shapes social structures and racist global power relations (Hall, 1992). As I explain elsewhere (Mahrouse 2008), to get at all of the complex factors that shape this White/Western racialized positioning, I combine the terms “White” and “Western” to point how they intertwine, conflate and stand in for one another. The slash or virgule (/) as it used here between the words “White/Western” will most often serve to emphasize the close relationship between the two ideas.
5. A good example that focuses on the context of Iraq is a recently published book, Baghdad Bulletin, by David Enders (2005). Enders, a graduate student at an American university who opposed the war, travelled to Iraq to see the aftermath first hand. While in Iraq, he produced and distributed an English-language newspaper of the same name. The book chronicles the eight bi-monthly issues that Enders and his contributors produced.
6. They have shown a revival of the “clash of civilizations” paradigm that marks Muslim and/or Arab bodies and spaces as violent.
7. Similarly, Hage (2003) explains that within this climate, those wishing to know and to inquire about the socio-political conditions that may have led to these events are perceived as “inherently suspect, a nuisance if not a traitor” (p. 87).
8. Writing about ethnographers doing fieldwork on violent struggles, Zulaika (2004) highlights the fact that although they are deemed “specialists,” they in fact often know very little, and what little they know comes from the local people.
Iris Jean-Klein’s (2002) work focuses on organized political observation tourism in the occupied Palestinian West Bank territories during the first Intifada in 1989. She examines issues of authority, objectivity, and neutrality as they emerged in the predispositions of European university students who participated in the tours. Jean-Klein highlights an important hidden dynamic whereby the Palestinian organizers who were dependent on the European student observers’ approval assumed the defensive role of trying to prove themselves. Jean-Klein describes the power relations of these political observation tours as a type of “structural coercion” wherein the young student observers judged the Palestinians’ activism against a predetermined “gold standard” of European modernity that, she contends, is a contemporary form of Western domination.

The CBC operates two television networks, four radio networks, and two 24-hour news channels in both of Canada’s official languages.

References


Gillmor, Dan. (2004). We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People O’Reilley Media: Sebastopol.


Jean-Klein, Iris, E. (2002). Alternative modernities, or accountable modernities? The Palestinian movement(s) and political (audit) tourism during the first intifada. *Journal of Mediterranean Studies, 12*(1), 43-79.


