

Report:

Citizen Journalism in Burma and the Legacy of Graham Spry

Julianne Pidduck
Université de Montréal

ABSTRACT This report explores issues arising from the 2009 Graham Spry Memorial events on the subject of citizen journalism in Burma, staging an encounter between aspects of the work of Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) and Graham Spry's legacy as a politically-engaged intellectual and lobbyist. I discuss the role of DVB as a "citizen journalism" network embedded in a "space of flows." Particular emphasis is placed on the organization's judicious use of "old" and "new" media in the struggle for democracy in Burma. The report also takes up Nancy Fraser's notion of "scales of justice" to discuss the power of media flows in a transnational public sphere and the limits of citizen journalism within pro-democracy movements in autocratic regimes such as that of Burma. I conclude with a discussion of the stakes of representation and inclusion, notably for questions of gender and ethnic diversity.

KEYWORDS Citizen journalism; Media and democracy; Transnational public sphere; Democratic Voice of Burma; Graham Spry

RÉSUMÉ Dans ce rapport, j'explore des questions soulevées lors de la Conférence commémorative Spry de 2009 sur le journalisme citoyen en Birmanie, rapprochant certains aspects du travail de Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) à l'héritage légué par Graham Spry dans son rôle d'intellectuel et lobbyiste engagé. Je présente la fonction de DVB d'assurer un réseau de journalistes citoyens situés dans un « espace des flux ». Ce faisant, je mets un accent particulier sur l'utilisation judicieuse des nouveaux médias et des médias traditionnels faite par DVB dans la lutte pour la démocratie en Birmanie. Je reprends aussi l'idée de « balance de la justice » développée par Nancy Fraser afin de discuter du pouvoir des flux médiatiques dans une sphère publique transnationale ainsi que des limites du journalisme citoyen dans le cadre de mouvements démocratiques assujettis à des régimes autocratiques comme celui de la Birmanie. Je conclus par un examen des enjeux de la représentation et de l'inclusion, notamment par rapport aux questions de sexe, genre et diversité ethnique.

MOTS CLÉS Journalisme citoyen; Médias et démocratie; Sphère publique transnationale; Democratic Voice of Burma; Graham Spry

The Graham Spry Memorial Fund was established in 1995 to stimulate annual academic and public debates about public broadcasting. The 2009 Spry Memorial

Julianne Pidduck is Professor in the Communication Department at the Université de Montréal, Pavillon Marie-Victorin, 90 Vincent-d'Indy, Outremont QC H2V 2S9. Email: julianne.pidduck@umontreal.ca.

events took up the case of citizen journalism in Burma, notably the example of Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), a multimedia organization that provides independent news coverage to citizens of Burma living under military rule and to the international community.¹ In this report, I propose an encounter between Spry's legacy, concerned with Canadian public broadcasting and with progressive movements for social change, and DVB's deployment of media to contribute to the struggle for a democratic public sphere in Burma. To set this dynamic contemporary phenomenon in dialogue with the Spry legacy, I would suggest, offers a refreshing analytical and pedagogical strategy for renewing our understanding of classic figures in Canadian communication studies.

This report reflects my own point of view as a feminist scholar engaged as a researcher and a teacher in the field of communication and globalization. Before writing this text, I was aware of Spry's importance for Canadian public broadcasting, but in assembling a more complete portrait, I came to recognize his extraordinary engagement in public life and social justice both in Canada and abroad. Indeed, this discussion of how media activists in exile struggle to provide public broadcasting for the citizens of a country under military rule resonates with Spry's commitment to social justice.

Born in St. Thomas, Ontario, Spry (1900-1983) studied at the University of Winnipeg and later at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. He worked as secretary of the National Association of Canadian Clubs from 1926-1932 (Smith, 2000). At a time when the future of Canadian public broadcasting was hanging in the balance between American commercial and British public-service models, Spry played a major role in lobbying R. B. Bennett's Conservative government to instate a public broadcasting model. Spry worked with Alan Plaunt through the Canadian Radio League to lobby for a national public broadcasting network. Their efforts were instrumental in establishing the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission in 1932, which evolved into the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) four years later (see McChesney, 1999). Spry also intervened throughout his life as a writer and the publisher of several influential magazines, including *Canadian Nation*, *Canadian Forum*, *Arts in Canada*, and *The Farmer's Sun* (Canadian Broadcast Museum Foundation, 2008).

Spry took an active role in the early days of the Canadian Commonwealth Federation (which became the NDP in 1961), and he ran twice, unsuccessfully, for public office in Ottawa during the 1930s. During the Spanish Civil War, he acted as vice-chairman of the Canadian Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (Zuehlke, 1996). Unable to find work in Canada in the 1940s due to his association with left-wing causes, Spry worked in Britain as an executive for Standard Oil (1940-1946); after the war, he was named agent-general for Tommy Douglas' CCF government in London, representing the province of Saskatchewan in Britain (1946-1968), which included responsibility for Europe and the Middle East. From his position in London, Spry was instrumental in neutralizing the 1962 Saskatchewan doctors' strike against Medicare, recruiting British doctors to emigrate to the province (Babe, 2005). Returning to Canada in 1968, Spry renewed his involvement with public broadcasting, founding the Canadian Broadcasting League and acting as president until 1973.

Worlds away from Spry's 1930s struggle for public broadcasting, Canadian cultural nationalism, and social justice, DVB's exiled media activists intervene in a radically different political and communicational environment—a context where national and transnational publics overlap, where Internet and satellite technologies co-exist with print and analog media, and where the Westphalian nation-state operates in tension with transnational politics and governance. In teaching communication and globalization at the undergraduate level, I have found that many students dismiss print and broadcast media as *passé* compared with the possibilities of “new media.” While it is difficult to put across the importance of community radio as a strategy for development, many students are quick to pick up on the idea that the decentralized, participatory architecture of “new media” is intrinsically democratic.

DVB's use of broadcast media alongside Internet and satellite technologies brings into relief a dynamic and changeable transnational media ecology—and the vital need for conjunctural studies that trace how social and political agents deploy different media within particular historical, cultural, and political frameworks. DVB was founded in 1992 by a group of students in exile from a country that has been under military rule since 1962. This multimedia organization provides independent journalism to Burma's multiethnic population of 48 million people and to the international community (Democratic Voice of Burma, 2010). The case of DVB highlights a series of timely questions related to public broadcasting: How have media activists from Burma incorporated “old” and “new media” to reach disparate publics? In what ways can citizen journalism contribute to building new modes of “publicity” in an autocratic country such as Burma?

The major 2009 Spry Memorial public event was a special screening of the documentary *Burma VJ: Reporting from a Closed Country* (Lense-Møller & Østergaard, 2008). This critically acclaimed film² dramatizes the 2007 Saffron Revolution in Burma through the eyes of clandestine citizen journalists. Østergaard's documentary has helped to bring international attention to DVB's crucial role in covering the protests of August to November 2007, when thousands of citizens took to the streets in response to abrupt fivefold increases in the price of fuel. The demonstrations were called the “Saffron Revolution” after the colour of the robes of the large number of Buddhist monks who played a leading role in them. The Buddhist faith reveres the monastic community (or *sangha*), whose members are seen as the society's spiritual leaders, and the extensive participation of monks gave the Saffron Revolution a powerful legitimacy—and at least initially, a sense of security, as the Buddhist faith abhors any violence toward the *sangha* (see Tournier, 2009).

The subtitle of *Burma VJ* is “Reporting from a Closed Country,” and Burma is indeed notorious for extensive censorship and for the harassment and imprisonment of journalists. The country was ranked 171st out of 175 countries listed in Reporters without Borders' 2009 *Press Freedom Index* (Reporters without Borders, 2009). In a country where it is illegal to criticize the regime publicly or privately, where all print and broadcast media are stringently censored and the Internet is subject to extensive filtering by the state (see Mottaz, 2010), the provision of independent news coverage is seen by many as crucial to a transition toward democracy. Offering shortwave news

broadcasts to the population of Burma since 1992, DVB introduced satellite television news broadcasts in 2005. Following the logic of a “feedback loop,” news reports gathered secretly by DVB journalists in Burma are assembled in the organization’s Oslo studio and broadcast back into Burma by satellite. Given a widespread awareness by citizens of Burma of the stringent censorship of official media, some researchers suggest that foreign-based shortwave radio and satellite radio broadcasts from Radio Free Asia, Voice of America, and the BBC’s Burmese Service, alongside DVB satellite television, reach far greater audiences than the official media controlled by the regime; it is important to note, however, that the signals of foreign and exile media are routinely jammed (Kyaw, 2009).³

Based partly on a dramatization of the events of the Saffron Revolution from the point of view of video journalist (VJ) “Joshua” based in a DVB office in Thailand, *Burma VJ* integrates extensive footage filmed in secret by citizen journalists in Burma. As the demonstrations escalated, the Burmese military prohibited coverage by foreign journalists. With no coverage by foreign media, and silence and misinformation from state-run media, DVB publicized the Saffron Revolution to broad segments of the population of Burma and to the world at large. At the end of September 2007, audiences in Burma and elsewhere watched in horror as the army clubbed and used tear gas on protestors; in images very shocking for the country’s majority Buddhist population, this same treatment was used on monks, who were beaten, defrocked, and even killed. During this period, there were also mass arrests of 3,000 to 4,000 protestors, and forced detention of thousands of monks during raids on monasteries (Altsean-Burma, 2007). *Burma VJ* also incorporates shocking DVB footage in which a soldier shot the Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai from Asia Press Front (APF) at point-blank range.

DVB deployed both old and new media to inform the citizens of Burma during the Saffron Revolution. Photographs and video footage shot with cellphones were uploaded onto the Web by ordinary citizens and picked up by international broadcasters. Meanwhile, DVB reporters shot footage on hidden digital cameras and sent it on foot over the border to the DVB office in Thailand or over the Internet to DVB headquarters in Oslo. DVB’s Oslo studio, in turn, edited the coverage into radio and television reports to be broadcast back into Burma. A dramatized sequence in *Burma VJ* depicts a group of people of different ages clustered around a television, watching the protests. Heightened by “Joshua’s” voice-over narration, the film powerfully conveys the sense of a people holding its breath, hoping that the demonstrations might lead to meaningful reform in a country plagued with political repression, widespread corruption, and terrible poverty for the majority of the population, despite Burma’s considerable nature resources.

While DVB’s shortwave radio and satellite TV broadcasts reached a significant portion of the population in Burma, cellphones, blogs, and Internet were also integral to the news gathering process. Mobile phones were indispensable to activists, and (as dramatized in *Burma VJ*) for relay between DVB journalists on the ground and in Thailand. Further, although Internet access is extremely limited in Burma, Mottaz (2010) points out that “bloggers found innovative ways to circumvent government restrictions and to send out updates about the protests. Many relied on foreign proxy

servers and encrypted e-mails to keep their blogs updated during the protest.” Meanwhile, DVB made their coverage available on the Web, where it was picked up extensively by the BBC, CNN, Deutsche Welle, Al Jazeera, and other international news networks. When Burma’s only two Internet service providers were disabled between September 29 and October 4, at the height of the protests, DVB reporters on the ground were able to send their coverage to Oslo by satellite (at considerable cost).

Recent scholarly work on citizen journalism foregrounds the use of new media for dissent both in “democratic” and autocratic countries. With the 2009 Green Revolution in Iran, and to a lesser extent the Saffron Revolution, I have observed a tremendous excitement surrounding the use of digital media (cellphones, social networking sites, blogs). Both popular and scholarly commentaries tend to associate digital media with democratic values, whereas older media forms are relegated to the margins or seen to be authoritarian or top-down. For instance, a study financed by Harvard University’s Berkman Center for Internet & Society documents Internet use by activists from Burma during the Saffron Revolution. Although the study has much to recommend it, the authors rely on an old/new media dichotomy, stating that “traditional media are completely controlled by the state,” but that the “new mass media” of online media offer more possibilities for resistance (Chowdhury, 2008, p. 7).

Useful for its relatively detailed account of the use of digital technologies by citizen journalists, the Berkman study fails to mention the long-standing shortwave radio and television broadcasts by exile media. Moreover, in emphasizing the liberatory potential of “Internet,” the study does not take into account the low Internet penetration in Burma.⁴ The study’s unwavering Internet focus precludes an analysis of “public broadcasting” as part of a gradual and ongoing process of social change, a point that I will return to below; this focus on Internet use by activists in a cat-and-mouse contest with state censorship recurs in Lea Buck’s 2007 study. This romantic fascination with bloggers and social networking websites, common in Northern countries with high rates of Internet access, prematurely dismisses print and broadcast media. It is important to remember, for instance, that radio remains a vital channel of communication, particularly for poor and rural populations, in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, and for remote populations in the so-called “First World.”

The Green Revolution in Iran makes for an interesting parallel to the Saffron Revolution. Abbas Varij Kazemi (2010) evokes de Certeau to describe how citizen “tactics” of the Iranian Green Revolution challenged state “strategies.” Kazemi points to the significant use of “small media,” particularly by middle-class Iranians during the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Xerox machines, cassette tapes, flyers) and again during the Green Revolution (blogs, cellphones, social networking sites). Thirty years after the Islamic Revolution, “Green” sympathizers re-deploy the slogans of 1979 and the small medium of the voice in cries from the rooftop of “*Allah wa Akbar*” or “God is great.” Kazemi wryly observes that things do not happen in the media or on YouTube, but rather that people use media to mobilize on the streets. Kazemi’s account of Iran’s Green Revolution gestures toward a more nuanced and conjunctural account of the

tactical use of “old” and “new” media by actors in particular communicational and political contexts.

The speed and versatility of Web 2.0 and wireless satellite technologies, which are perhaps best understood as complementary to broadcast media, undoubtedly facilitate DVB's news coverage of “a closed country” for the international community. Indeed, thousands of people living in political and economic exile from Burma have used Internet activism for this purpose since 1995, notably the Free Burma Coalition (Chowdhury, 2008). Successful in garnering international financial and technological support, DVB uses Internet and satellite technologies strategically for gathering and broadcasting information. Most recently, in April 2009 DVB began streaming on the Livestation platform.

This feedback loop through which citizen journalists alert the international community to events in Burma recurred dramatically in May 2008 in the wake of Cyclone Nargis. The cyclone hit the fertile and heavily populated Irrawaddy Delta, killing an estimated 140,000 people, leaving roughly 2.4 million people in need of humanitarian aid. In the following days and weeks, the Burmese regime blocked international news coverage of the disaster and refused international aid. DVB played an important role in communicating the extent of the humanitarian crisis to the international community, which in turn exerted considerable political pressure on the military regime, including a resolution at the United Nations Security Council calling for direct delivery of aid to the Irrawaddy Delta (Burma Campaign UK, 2010a). While the Security Council resolution was vetoed by China, a close ally of the military regime, international pressure eventually led to the delivery of a limited amount of humanitarian aid.

DVB won the 2009 Rory Peck award—awarded annually to recognize the dangerous work of independent cameramen and documentary-makers—for best feature documentary for their coverage of the cyclone's devastating effects on children in *Dispatches: Orphans of the Storm* (Sinnerton, Williams, & Williams, 2009). Unfortunately, neither of the two cameramen who won the award could accept it in Bangkok, as “T” is in the custody of the Burmese authorities, facing a 10-year prison sentence, and “Z” was in hiding in Thailand at the time of the award ceremony (Ruffini, 2009).

Public media and democracy

Robert E. Babe (2005) notes that in the later years of his life, Graham Spry often remarked that

‘Life is information.’... Culture, according to Spry, is information.... Information is the prime integrating factor creating, nourishing, adjusting, and sustaining society. (p. 215)

Correlating communication and community in the spirit of some cultural studies discourse, Spry also incorporates the language of cybernetics: “A society, a community, a nation, like any other organism, is a function of a network; society is organized, integrated and made responsive by information” (Spry, as quoted in Babe, p. 215). Spry described public broadcasting as “a majestic instrument of national unity and national culture” (p. 40). Unusual for his time, Spry strongly supported a fully bilin-

gual Canadian public broadcasting system (Babe, 2005). In the multiethnic state of Burma, as in Canada, to evoke national unity as a function of information flows raises a series of thorny questions about national and political unity, and questions of cultural difference in an imagined national public sphere.

DVB, like Spry, demonstrates the strategic importance of information in forging a national public. Operating in exile, DVB is an unusual variety of public broadcaster. The organization's mandate is to "promote understanding and cooperation amongst the various ethnic and religious groups of Burma," where diverse ethnic minorities constitute approximately one third of the population of 48 million; to "encourage and sustain independent public opinion and enable social and political debate"; and "to impart the ideals of democracy and human rights to the Burmese people" (Democratic Voice of Burma, 2010). At its inception, DVB was perceived as the voice of the exile National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB).⁵ However, since the mid-1990s, DVB, like the influential news provider *The Irrawaddy*, has established itself as an independent broadcaster—a contested status that I will return to below.

DVB participates in a "public-building" project addressing a multiethnic population in hopes of contributing to a new sort of national consciousness; it also contributes to a transnational information network connecting a large diasporic population of exiles and refugees, international publics, NGOs, and governments. Through this network, DVB purposefully inhabits a "space of flows" composed of people (exiled activists, former students, and journalists), images and information, geopolitical discourse, and capital. In addition to its journalists operating in secret inside Burma, the organization is based in Oslo, Norway, and also operates in Thailand. DVB has received funding from many international funding agencies, including Worldview Rights (Norway), the National Endowment for Democracy (Washington), Free Voice of the Netherlands (Amsterdam), The Freedom of Expression Foundation and the Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute (New York), and Rights & Democracy (Montréal).

In contrast with Spry's Canadian public sphere housed within the (contested) borders of a Westphalian state, DVB operates within what might be called a transnational public sphere, while the democratic ideal of a democratic public sphere housed in the state of Burma remains elusive. Nancy Fraser (2009) observes that while a transnational public sphere predominantly generated by media flows produces one discourse of justice—in this case, a call for human rights, freedom of expression and democracy in Burma—this geopolitical discourse does not align with the politico-legal jurisdiction of the state of Burma. This spatial and legal disjuncture corresponds to a widespread contemporary geopolitical dilemma that Fraser describes as incommensurable "scales of justice." Fraser's theory is significant here, as it identifies a major political blindspot to romantic discourses about the liberatory or democratic potential of "new" media.

Burma VJ dramatizes the tremendous hope generated in the early days of the Saffron Revolution, and DVB's coverage of the demonstrations at home and abroad was in some ways a tactical success: The organization made a major contribution to

informing citizens of Burma despite state-controlled censorship of “official” media in Burma. Nonetheless, the Saffron Revolution was eventually crushed by the military, with thousands of arrests (including several DVB journalists) and dozens of casualties, including monks. On an international scale, the rapid transmission of coverage galvanized awareness and political pressure that may have delayed or mitigated an even more violent crackdown by the regime. By way of comparison, the last major demonstrations of 1988, which had far less international coverage, were crushed far more violently, with hospital staff estimating casualties of 3,000 protestors in Rangoon alone (Charney, 2000, p. 151-153).

While the Saffron Revolution and Iran’s Green Revolution demonstrate the tactical potential of both old and new media, they need to be understood in their full political and historical complexity. We saw in Burma in 2007 and in Iran in 2009 that the limit-point of public demonstrations lies in the raw power of the military state. Another crucial limit point is the transnational geopolitical balance of power. For instance, China (a major trading partner and political supporter of the Burmese generals) consistently uses its veto power in high-level UN Security Council resolutions concerning Burma.⁶ The challenge for communication scholars lies in understanding how the resourceful deployments of old and new, small and “mass” broadcasting media may add new dimensions to national and transnational political dynamics surrounding social movements and the contestation of state authority.

The notion of scales of justice also points to a political and ethical limit-point of discourses of national publics. In the case of Burma, Tibet, Iran, or, somewhat differently, Palestine, movements advocating social change, democracy, or liberation operate both locally and abroad through the financial support of foreign governments and agencies. Transnational flows of funding for media projects concerned with democracy and human rights are precarious and deeply *political*. In the case of DVB and other exile media operating in and around Burma, Lisa Brooten (2006) suggests that the label of “independent” media is essential for exile media to attract international funding; however, she suggests that the relationship on the ground between exile media such as DVB and *Irrawaddy* and explicitly political bodies such as the NCGUB and other political and armed groups is far more complex (p. 363-367).

Another example of the deeply political nature of international funding can be found closer to home with the recent crisis at Rights & Democracy, one of DVB’s funding partners and the co-sponsor of this year’s Spry Memorial events. The Montréal-based agency has been at the centre of a major political controversy concerning the Harper government’s alleged ideological interference. Sparked by the tragic death of the agency’s president Rémy Beauregard in January 2010 after a contentious meeting of the board of directors, this controversy centred on the agency’s funding of three small projects engaged in the documentation of human rights violations in Gaza in the wake of the Israeli army’s bombardments of January 2009. The funding for these projects was retroactively repudiated by the board of directors in January 2010; the agency’s board is named by the federal government, and several members appointed recently by the Harper government have close links with right-wing Zionist organizations (see Wells, 2010).

Although the funding for Rights & Democracy's work in Burma has not been affected, this case demonstrates the highly sensitive nature of transnational funding. The public perception of DVB, both in Burma and abroad, points to a series of ethical and political issues associated with political and media representation and critique. Although DVB seeks to contribute to the emergence of a "democratic" public, an exile media organization cannot generate a public sphere in the traditional sense, "conceived as a space for the communicative generation of public opinion [where] it matters who participates and on what terms" (Fraser, 2009, p. 76).

In the seminar discussion that constituted the second event of the 2009 Spry Memorial, several key questions were raised concerning representation and inclusion in relation to DVB. This seminar featured Lisa Brooten (a specialist on journalism and human rights in Burma), with the participation of Khin Maung Win (co-founder and executive director of DVB) and Mika Lévesque (representing Rights & Democracy as a funding agency for DVB). The presence of three experts with very different agendas in relation to media and the struggle for democracy in Burma, as well as a strong group of post-graduate students and professors, led to a fascinating discussion.

One crucial issue associated with the problems of representation and inclusion in the democratic process that I can only touch upon here is that of ethnic minorities. Burma is a country of tremendous ethnic diversity, with more than 100 languages and dialects, and ethnic minorities constitute roughly 31% of the population. Historically, there has been considerable mistrust between the Burman ethnic majority and minority ethnic groups—a mistrust that has been manipulated by British colonial rulers and by subsequent military regimes. Ethnic minority groups in outlying areas have been the target of military violence, including many documented incidents of violence against women.

DVB's radio and television broadcasts are primarily in the majority Burman language, but in recognition of the country's ethnic diversity, the organization also broadcasts on a weekly basis in ethnic minority languages Mon, Arakan, Chin, Shan, Karen, Karenni, Kayan and Kachin. In this sense, DVB broadcasts to a diverse national public. At the same time, it is important to mention that in addition to exile, international, and state-run media, the mediascape of Burma includes an important number of indigenous print media and radio stations. Brooten (2006) suggests that the legitimacy of media organizations like DVB and *The Irrawaddy* for international funding agencies lies in their status both as "independent" media and as organizations "'unmarked' in terms of ethnic identification" (p. 362). Unfortunately, one implication of the success of these large organizations is that indigenous media receive far more limited support. Crucial questions of cultural differences, and media representation can by no means be resolved here, but like the questions of French-language and First Nations broadcasting in Canada, they constitute a major element of the mediascape in Burma.

During the seminar, Brooten also raised the question of gender representation in media discourse surrounding the pro-democracy movement in Burma. She noted that *Burma VJ's* compelling portrait of male video journalists corresponds with a standard romantic discourse of masculine revolutionaries; no women are positioned as agents of opposition movements in the documentary. Further, Brooten critiques what

she calls a “protection scenario” common to many mainstream American representations of Burma. These representations often feature “a highly gendered Orientalist framework to position the United States as a protector, characterized by the strength and willingness to help its less mature democratic siblings worldwide, but also as a victim, threatened by external dangers to its own democracy” (Brooten, 2005, p. 136). Through this scenario, the U.S.A. is poised as an active male agent who can intervene to save “the Lady” (Aung San Suu Kyi), a “powerful feminine personification of besieged democracy” (p. 135).

To extend this discussion, I would also mention the International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in Burma that took place in New York City in March 2010 in parallel with the annual meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. Co-organized by the Women’s League of Burma and the Nobel Women’s Initiative, the tribunal featured testimony by 12 women who had suffered violence at the hands of the military. The tribunal was organized to publicize the widespread military campaign of violence targeting minority ethnic groups, particularly women (Nobel Women’s Initiative, 2010). As a counterpoint to a romantic discourse of male citizen journalists popularized by accounts such as *Burma VJ*, the question of violence against women in Burma is largely absent from mainstream Western media coverage of human rights abuses. A case in point, the New York tribunal received very little press coverage.⁷

At the end of the research seminar, the discussion turned to the ethics of academics representing and critiquing the work of groups such as DVB, and indirectly the choices of funding agencies such as Rights & Democracy. There was a definite unease in the room as critiques concerning gender, ethnicity, and national unity were voiced, and this unease was translated into a brief and important discussion of the role of academics studying political violence. Mika Lévesque (from Rights & Democracy) noted that academics have both the time and the role of thinking through these difficult ethical questions, while activists and NGOs are often taken up with the urgency of the situation on the ground. She added that academic studies can facilitate activist work and its funding by public bodies by documenting specific projects such as citizen journalism. Khin Maung Win (of DVB) responded that any public discussion about Burma is good for the cause of the pro-democracy movement.

Conclusion

Khin Maung Win’s insistence on the importance of public debate brings us back to the core project of DVB, which is to make *public*, both to audiences inside Burma and to transnational audiences what transpires in this “closed” country. On this note, under considerable international pressure to demonstrate a transition toward democracy, the military rulers of Burma have announced that the first elections in Burma since 1990 will take place on November 7, 2010. Even months before the election during the writing of this report, the legitimacy of these elections is in considerable doubt, given that the country’s 2,000 political prisoners are prohibited from running for office, including Aung San Suu Kyi who is still under house arrest. The country’s most famous political prisoner, “the Lady,” is the leader of the NLD, the political party that won a democratic election in 1990 and was prevented by the generals from taking

power. DVB and *The Irrawaddy*, as well as other exile and international media, will undoubtedly play an important role in covering this event.

In this report, I have drawn certain parallels between citizen journalism in Burma and the legacy of Graham Spry. He was a talented and politically engaged lobbyist who promoted a mode of public broadcasting that is inextricably tied to values of democracy, freedom of speech and of the press, and human rights. In highlighting Spry's more directly *political* legacy, it is possible to draw parallels between his support from Canada for the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War, or for Medicare in Saskatchewan while based in Britain, to a broader historical legacy that connects progressive Canadian intellectuals with international movements such as the South African Anti-Apartheid Movement, or indeed transnational movements for democracy in Burma, for Tibetan independence, or for human rights in Palestine. If in addition to the ideal of public broadcasting, the Spry legacy also highlights debate and critical thought, then our role as communication scholars is to carefully assess how actors deploy "old" and "new" media, and to what end, within complex political, socio-historical, and cultural transnational conjunctures.

Notes

1. On November 19, 2009, the Communication Department at the Université de Montréal hosted a special screening of Anders Østergaard's documentary *Burma VJ: Reporting from a Closed Country* (Lense-Møller & Østergaard, 2008). The film was followed by presentations from guests Khin Maung Win, co-founder and executive director of Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), a non-profit media organization based in Oslo and committed to responsible journalism, and Mika Lévesque, the regional officer for Asia at Rights & Democracy, the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, based in Montréal. The events continued the next morning with a research seminar beginning with a presentation from the third guest, Lisa Brooten (from the Department of Radio-Television at Southern Illinois University Carbondale), who presented a paper about the gender politics of American coverage of Burma. The seminar concluded with a discussion of ethical issues surrounding the academic study of political violence as well as the relationship between academic research and social change.

2. *Burma VJ* was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival and for Best Documentary Feature at the March 2010 Academy Awards.

3. Based on an estimate by DVB. Although this DVB article is by no means "objective," it is important to note that due to the extreme control of the media in Burma, no official audience statistics exist. During the Spry Memorial events, Khin Maung Win told me that DVB estimates its audience to be roughly 10 million people.

4. Precise figures on Internet access in Burma are very difficult to find. According to a recent study by the Open Net Initiative, only 0.6% of the population had home Internet access in 2005: "[S]ince computers are too expensive for most Burmese citizens, and dial-up accounts only provide access to the Myanmar Internet and state-run e-mail services, most Burmese Internet users access the Internet from cybercafés in Rangoon and Mandalay" (Open Net Initiative, 2005, p. 5).

5. In the wake of massive pro-democracy demonstrations in 1988, the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi won national elections by a landslide in 1990. When the military regime refused to cede power and arrested many members of the NLD, including elected officials, many pro-democracy activists fled over the border to Thailand (Charney, 2000). At that time, eight refugee elected members of parliament established the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), and this body has continued to elect a new "coalition government" every four years for the last 20 years.

6. After Cyclone Nargis, for instance, China vetoed a Security Council resolution calling for direct humanitarian aid to the region affected by the natural disaster. During the Saffron Revolution, after initially blocking a Security Council statement, China agreed to a resolution “strongly deploring” the regime’s use of force against demonstrators (see Burma Campaign UK, 2010a; BBC News, 2007).
7. It is important to note that in addition to their ongoing financial support of DVB, Rights & Democracy is a long-time funding partner of the Burmese Women’s Union, an organization that works to increase women’s political participation within the Burmese pro-democratic movement as well as in a future democratic Burma (Rights & Democracy, 2010).

References

- ALTSEAN-BURMA. (2007). *Saffron Revolution: The crackdown. Alternative Asean Network on Burma*. URL: http://www.altsean.org/Research/Saffron%20Revolution/SRCrack_down.htm [September 21, 2010].
- Babe, Robert E. (2005). *Information and the transformation of economics: Essays in information, public policy, and political economy*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- BBC News. (2007, October 12). *UN Security Council rebukes Burma*. URL: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7040371.stm> [July 20, 2010].
- Brooten, Lisa. (2005). The feminization of democracy under siege: The media, “the lady” of Burma, and U.S. foreign policy. *Feminist Formations*, 17(3), 134-156.
- Brooten, Lisa. (2006). Political violence and journalism in a multiethnic state: A case study of Burma (Myanmar). *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 30(4), 354-373.
- Buck, Lea. (2007). Media and protests in the Myanmar crisis. *Südostasien aktuell—Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 26(6), 50-66.
- Burma Campaign UK. (2010a). *Cyclone Nargis devastates Burma*. URL: <http://www.burma-campaign.org.uk/index.php/burma/about-burma/about-burma/cyclone-nargis-main> [July 18, 2010].
- Canadian Broadcast Museum Foundation. (2008, May 1). Successful launch of the Graham Spry documentary, “Radical Dreamer.” *Canadian Broadcast Museum Foundation Newsletter*, 1(1). URL: <http://www.cbmf-fmcr.ca/Newsletter/may2008/spry.php> [July 14, 2010].
- Charney, Michael W. (2000). *A history of modern Burma*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Chowdhury, Mridul. (2008). The role of the Internet in Burma’s Saffron Revolution. *Berkman Center Research Publication No. 2008-8*. URL: <http://sn104w.snt104.mail.live.com/default.aspx?wa=wsignin1.0> [July 14, 2010].
- Democratic Voice of Burma. (2010). *About*. URL: <http://www.dvb.no/about> [July 17, 2010].
- Fraser, Nancy. (2009). *Scales of justice: Reimagining political space in a globalizing world*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Kazemi, Abbas Varij. (2010, June 18). *Walking in the streets of my city, Tehran*. Paper presented at the Association for Cultural Studies Crossroads Conference at Lingnan University, Hong Kong.
- Kyaw, Htet Aung. (2009, February 20). *The role of media in Burma’s transition to democracy*. URL: <http://www.dvb.no/features/the-role-of-the-media-in-burmas-transitiontodemocracy-2/2366> [July 16, 2010].
- Lense-Møller, Lise & Østergaard, Anders (Director). (2008). *Burma VJ: Reporting from a closed country* [Film]. Denmark: Magic Hour Films.
- McChesney, Robert W. (1999). Graham Spry and the future of public broadcasting: The 1997 Spry Memorial Lecture. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 24(1). URL: <http://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1081> [August 8, 2010].
- Mottaz, Laura. (2010). New media in closed societies: The role of digital technologies in Burma’s Saffron Revolution. *Democracy & Society*, 7(2). URL: <http://www.democracyandsociety.com/blog/wpcontent/uploads/2010/07/MottazSaffronRevolution7.22.pdf> [July 16, 2010].

- Nobel Women's Initiative. (2010). *International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Burma*. URL: <http://www.nobelwomensinitiative.org/blogs/burmatribunal> [July 20, 2010].
- Open Net Initiative. (2005). *Internet filtering in Burma in 2005: A country study*. URL: <http://open-net.net/studies/burma#toc2b> [July 16, 2010].
- Reporters without Borders. (2009). *Press freedom index 2009*. URL: <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2009,1001.html> [July 7, 2010].
- Rights & Democracy*. (2010). Home page. URL: <http://www.dd-rd.ca/site/home/index.php> [July 20, 2010].
- Ruffini, Paul. (2009, November 25). Top award given to brave journalists from Burma. *Bangkok Post*. URL: <http://www.bangkokpost.com/news/local/161052/top-award-given-to-brave-journalists-from-burma> [July 17, 2010].
- Sinnerton, Siobhan (Executive Producer), Williams, Evan & Williams, Jeremy (Producers/Directors) *Dispatches: Orphans of the Storm*. (2009). [Television Documentary]. United Kingdom: QuickSilver Media.
- Smith, David. (2000, March 1). Graham Spry: The father of Canadian public broadcasting. *Friends of Canadian Broadcasting*. URL: <http://www.friends.ca/pub/189> [July 13, 2010].
- Tournier, Abel. (2009). La religion, espace où s'entremêlent profane, sacré et idée nationale. In O. Guillard (Ed.), *Birmanie 2020: De l'état des lieux aux perspectives* (pp. 53-67). Paris, France: Dalloz.
- Wells, Paul. (2010, February 12). A losing battle. *Maclean's*. URL: <http://www2.macleans.ca/2010/02/12/a-losing-battle/> [July 14, 2010].
- Zuehlke, Mark. (1996). *The gallant cause: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*. Mississauga, ON: John Wiley & Sons Canada.