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The Don of Hockey: Making Comments and Offers We Can't Refuse

Giuliana Cucinelli & David Pickup

I died on May 10th, 1979; 11:10 p.m. to be exact. Two shots killed me. The first, which left me critically wounded, was fired by Guy Lafleur. The one that wiped me out came from the stick of Yvon Lambert. Had I survived these attacks I have no doubt that I would still be coach of the Boston Bruins today, quite likely, governor of Massachusetts. (Cherry, 1982)

In March 1955 Montréal was the city to be in, the reason: twofold. On March 17 of that year, a young player, Maurice *Rocket* Richard made front-page headlines when the National Hockey League's (NHL) President Clarence Campbell suspended him for deliberately injuring defenseman Hal Laycoe in a game against the Boston Bruins. From this incident stemmed a slew of riots and outrage from loyal hockey fans, forever etched in *bleu blanc rouge* history as the "Richard Riot," and, a major flashpoint heightening French-English tensions in Québec; all leading to the Quiet Revolution and beyond (Irvin Jr., 2001). Two weeks later, Dick Irvin Sr., the Montréal Canadiens head coach, stood behind the Habs' (Montréal's nickname for the Canadiens) bench during the pivotal game for the latest rookie on the Boston Bruins roster. Standing proud at 5ft 11 inches and weighing 180 pounds, one-gamer Don Cherry skated his life away only to taste the agony of bittersweet defeat to the Montréal Canadiens that same night. Fortunately for hockey, the *Rocket* laced up and led the Habs to their eighth Stanley Cup in 1956, while Cherry blamed a "baseball injury" that kept him off the ice that season, and the for rest of his life.

If all the stars and planets had aligned for Cherry on March 31st, 1955, the Montréal Canadiens would have lost; Cherry would have continued playing in the NHL, and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) would have been Cherry-less. Instead, Cherry packed his bags, grabbed his hockey stick, and soon became a struggling Cadillac salesman turned construction worker to earn a living at a mere \$2 an hour. Not long after, he was hired by the American Hockey League (AHL) and later the NHL as a coach. Cherry's hard work and determination connect the

people of Canada to him, even though there has always been a love-hate relationship for him; he has become an icon in Canadian hockey, alongside Wayne Gretzky and Maurice Richard. In Canada Cherry is known not for his stick skills, but for his straight talk and outspoken ferocity on the CBC's *Hockey Night in Canada*.

In a country where a typical social lubricant is talk about weather, beer, and hockey, a Saturday evening without the beloved Don Cherry and his flamboyant attire would not be well, Saturday evening. He is the avenue into what is a multi billion-dollar industry, growing more than ever with team expansions and talks of international game tours. A clear indication of Cherry's popularity is his fandom and online communities with social networking sites like FaceBook. A quick search on FaceBook will generate over 500 tribute groups created for Cherry: *Don Cherry for Prime Minister*, *Don Cherry is my GOD and his Suits just get better every year!*, *The Church of Don Cherryology*, *Don Cherry for NHL Commissioner*, and *Don Cherry A Hockey God*. Of course, there are quite a few groups to counter Cherry and his beliefs, with innovative names: *I turn off Hockey Night in Canada when Don Cherry comes on*, *F*** Don Cherry!!! Vive Le Québec FRancais!!!*, *Let's Replace Don Cherry with Bill Cosby* and a crowd favourite *Don Cherry is an old senile mother f***er*. These groups occupy various subtype categories on FaceBook, ranging from *Sports & Recreation*, *Just for Fun*, *Common Interest*, *Beliefs & Causes*, *Religious Beliefs*, and *Philosophy*. The subject matter that appears throughout the groups relates back to that love-hate relationship Canadians have with Cherry. It is important to analyse an essential Canadian personality like Don Cherry. By studying Don Cherry as a cultural phenomenon, we view his role in our Canadian culture, politics, the corporate sports sphere, and just what it is that compels Canadian viewers to this unique character.

With the advent of new media tools such as social networking sites, blogging, and collective intelligence, it has become easier for voices to be heard. Although Cherry himself does not participate in any online engagements, he lives through the words and ideas of his faithful followers and consequently Cherry becomes a vehicle for further socio-political ideologies to be heard. This, in turn allows the bloggers and followers to debate, analyse, and exchange information concerning cultural actions, which often dwarf hockey itself. The questions this man raises are multifold: Does Cherry operate as the vox populi vis-à-vis sports, politics, and culture? And is Cherry the right fit for the CBC's mandate to promote cultural expression? It is necessary to engage in critical discourse surrounding Cherry and issues of masculinity, violence, politics, and culture. In order to fully understand Don Cherry as a growing phenomenon, we must peel off layers of information to arrive at the core of the icon. Being able to understand Cherry is engaging in a critical media literacy in a society dominated by hyper masculinity, sensationalised violence and corrupt professional sports.

Growing Up Cherry Style

"I must admit my style has been called foppish, but I like it." (Cherry, 2001)

Donald Stewart Cherry was born in the heart of Royalist Canada, Kingston, Ontario, on February 5th, 1934. His grandfather served in the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery during the Great War and fought at Vimy Ridge. His father, Del Cherry, also served in the RCHA. As a child, Don would witness another generation of Canadians go to war for King and Country when Canada declared war on Germany and the Axis powers in September 1939. The youngest Cherry joined a civilian pipe and drum band.

Like most Canadian boys of the era, Cherry was enamoured with hockey. He played junior with the Barrie Flyers and the Windsor Spitfires of the Ontario Hockey Association, winning the Memorial Cup with Barrie in 1953. The following year he would drop out of high school to pursue his hockey dreams full time, signing with the American Hockey League's Hershey Bears. In 1955 he received his first and only call up to the National Hockey League (NHL), playing one game with the Boston Bruins in 1955. However, a career in the NHL was not to be, and Cherry would become most closely identified with the AHL's Rochester Americans, playing with them for 15 seasons. He retired from hockey in 1970. Cherry later returned to the Rochester Americans as coach midway through the 1971-72 season. He met with success, and in this third year as coach was named the AHL's "Coach of the Year." This would earn him his second NHL call-up, again with the Boston Bruins. He was made head coach of one of the NHL's most popular and successful teams, managing them through several seasons. Later he would also manage the Colorado Rockies. Cherry made a name for himself with his bizarre sartorial decisions and flamboyant behaviour. He always encouraged a rough and combative style of hockey and lived to his own expectations—airing his disagreements with management publicly and, in one famous incident, reaching over the boards to manhandle a player who ignored his decision to come off the ice.

In 1980 Cherry made the leap into broadcasting, first as a studio analyst for the CBC's Stanley Cup playoff coverage, and later as a full-time colour commentator. His job as commentator did not last long, ruined by an inability to remain non-partisan; particularly when his favoured Boston Bruins or Toronto Maple Leafs were playing—or his nemesis, the hated Montréal Canadiens. Instead, the CBC created *Coach's Corner*, a segment that appeared in the first intermission on *Hockey Night In Canada*. In this segment, Cherry would chat with his co-host (first Dave Hodge, later Ron McLean) and freely pontificate on hockey. Whether behind the bench or on air, it was evident that Cherry was a natural born entertainer, and this was an aspect of Cherry that Dick Irvin Jr. had seen long before *Couch's Corner* aired, "There was a television moment during the 1980 playoffs that, to me, was an omen of things to come on *HNIC*" (Irvin Jr., 2001). He witnessed the omen during an on-air interview with Cherry and Minnesota coach Glen Sonmor as Cherry's role

shifted from former coach to future commentator on the CBC, “I thought then and there this guy might have a future in a TV studio” (Irvin. Jr., 2001).

Stuck Between Sir John A. MacDonald and Lester B. Pearson

“I think the people, the workingman people, made a statement here, that you don't have to be a college graduate to be a good Canadian.” (Cherry, 2004)

In 2004, when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation decided to follow in the footsteps of its British sister and launch a patriotic contest to pick the country's most favoured citizen, few would have been surprised to see the names of hockey players interspersed with politicians and scientists on the short list. Canadians have always defined notable eras in our history as much by the hockey stars of the day as by our political leaders—Wayne Gretzy, Bobby Hull, Guy Lafleur and Maurice Rocket Richard.

However, it was not a hockey *player* who became the story of the contest, but a hockey commentator—*Coach's Corner* host Don “Grapes” Cherry. Cherry polled in at number seven between the likes of Sir John A. MacDonald and Lester B. Pearson. Supporting Cherry (a write-in candidate) for the position of “Greatest Canadian” became a *cause célèbre* for people across the country, but more particularly among an activist community of bloggers primarily from the right side of the political spectrum. This was not the first time that Don Cherry had found himself positioned in the centre of a political and cultural discourse. Indeed, over the years he has become not only a lightning rod for controversy but a leader around whom certain segments of the country are proud to rally.

“Don Cherry represents a lot of Canadians, generally those that work hard for their paycheque. He tells it like it is and often runs counter to the national narrative that says that Canadians are polite and quiet and don't have strong opinions,” so says Stephen Taylor, founder of the *Blogging Tories* online community and participant in the 2004 campaign to see Cherry crowned “Greatest Canadian.” It is not surprising that Don Cherry would appeal to bloggers sympathetic to his viewpoints. Like Cherry, many bloggers succeed largely on their ability to express an opinion in a colourful or memorable manner. In this sense, Cherry is a kind of an “Amateur-in-Chief” to these emerging online communities. The media are a frequent target of political bloggers, who structure their identities in an adversarial stance to the “MSM” (Mainstream Media), and Cherry, unlike the well-polished journalists that surround him, comes off as an average sort of guy able to inject his personal opinion into the national discourse of the country. This is a position no doubt envied by many bloggers.

Moreover, on the right-side of the political spectrum bloggers often vent frustration at the CBC in particular, an institution they view as a left-leaning Liberal-friendly broadcasting corporation. Indeed, part of the motivation (and perhaps the driving force) behind the campaign to elect Don Cherry the “Greatest Canadian” was a desire to embarrass the CBC. As Taylor readily admits,

[Cherry] is always a thorn in CBC's side (ideologically and politically) and he often is rumored to be on the last year of his contract before they redefine *HNIC* without him. So, I wanted to insert some irony into the contest and if successful make CBC swallow hard when they would name him "Greatest Canadian. (Taylor, S., personal interview, October 3, 2007)

The campaign therefore was less about Cherry as an individual being the "Greatest Canadian" than an opportunity for conservative bloggers and activists to demonstrate their voice and influence in the political process and take a shot at the CBC in the process. As such it was an attempt to undermine the consensus opinion of cultural elites at the CBC on the part of an active minority rather than a groundswell of populist opinion. Don Cherry was simply the banner around which to rally. The ability of the fans of this home-grown *plain talker*, to walk over the upper-crust of the CBC made an essential social statement about class rebellion and the rejection of the elitist attitudes of the CBC. The irony cannot be escaped. This highlights nicely the conflicting tensions wrought by emerging Web 2.0 technologies and the difficulty in assessing the representative value of online communities and bloggers.

On the one hand, Web 2.0 can empower and facilitate civic involvement; yet on the other, they undermine traditional sources of authority. Andrew Keen, for example, argues in his 2007 polemic *The Cult of the Amateur* that blogs are "collectively corrupting and confusing popular opinion about everything from politics, to commerce, to arts and culture." Keen sees chaos and confusion rather than some kind of utopian marketplace of ideas, and he laments the preponderance of amateur voices celebrated merely for successfully drawing attention to themselves (what he would think of Don Cherry is unknown). The *Blogging Tories* however would likely disagree. Many have expressed in their writings a desire to have viewpoints outside the mainstream receive proper public consideration and they would no doubt be much more sympathetic to Pierre Levy's formulation of the "Cosmopedia," detailed in his work *Collective Intelligence*. For Levy, and authors like Henry Jenkins and James Surowiecki, Web 2.0 and the "blogosphere" offer the chance to transform power structures by broadening the collective "knowledge space" of society. If these latter authors are to be believed, then the "blogstorm" generated by conservative bloggers was a moment of empowerment where they collectively worked together towards a common goal of getting Don Cherry first nominated and then hopefully awarded the distinction of "Greatest Canadian." Considering that Don Cherry's name was not even on the initial list of candidates, placing 7th overall is testimony to his significance as a cultural marker in the knowledge space of Canadian politics.

How did this come to be? How did a hockey commentator not known for being particularly articulate gain a position of such influence? The answer may lie in the complex weave of competing perceptions of Canadian culture that underlie our construct of "hockey," one that includes such factors as competition between the original English and French settler populations and colonialist attitudes to minority groups. Specifically, Don Cherry embodies the spirit of pre-1960s "Commonwealth

Canada,” a fiercely proud and *English* Canada. It is for this reason that his most vocal opponents and critics have long been French Canadians. However, in an increasingly multicultural Canada, Cherry has started to run up against new conflicts, which might eventually derail his long and successful run on Canadian television.

Hockey as Cultural Institution

I don't have any hobbies. I don't golf. I don't fish. I have no other interests in life except hockey. (Cherry, 2001)

Hockey fills a unique place not only in the Canadian cultural landscape, but also in the Canadian psyche. Books have been written and documentaries produced to argue the thesis that hockey is an essential component to our definition of self. It is said that the game is a true invention of the people of Canada, one that speaks to our ability to triumph over an often-harsh climate and fight our way through adversity.

Hockey has always had a roughness to its character. Even in the early days of the sport, when it was still largely the domain of an elite class, hockey was heavily influenced by a traditional British public-school sensibility (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993, p. 41). This tradition stressed manliness and rewarded competitive spirit. Of course, hockey was not confined to the English populations of Canada but was a popular diversion amongst French Canadians and natives as well. Rivalries between the two main linguistic groups have often spilled out onto the ice throughout Canadian history. The repeated clashes between Montréal's Maroons and Canadiens in the early part of the 20th Century often acted as a projection of real life tensions underlying Montréal society while at the same time provided an element of common identity. Towards the end of the century the Canadiens would find themselves the champions of the other side in their rivalry with Québec City Nordiques, the heroes to Québec's nationalist movement. To a lesser extent the historic rivalry between the Montréal Canadiens and the Toronto Maple Leafs has also had linguistic connotations. These games have often turned violent and indeed often acted as a cathartic release for the audience, players, and sportscasters alike.

Professional ice hockey has had its fair share of rivalries on both a national and international scale, with teams including Canada, the United States, and the Soviet Union (Russia). The *Summit Series* of 1972 is a prime example of sports grounded in a political agenda, where winning not only means having hockey supremacy, but international political status. But, these issues do not only exist in hockey. Organizations in other professional sports have gone as far as creating a network of key players, referees, and managers to sabotage specific leagues for profit and stature. In May 2006 the Italian "A" Series Soccer league was accused of match fixing, which led Juventus, A.C. Milan, Fiorentina, Lazio, and Reggia teams to be scrutinised by the Italian police authorities. The teams involved were demoted to a lower series, key contributors were fined, referees suspended, and club presidents banned. All seemed well until Italy made headlines again in the

2006 FIFA World Cup mayhem. A worldwide audience was engaged in a discourse based on religion and culture differences in July 2006 during the infamous Zidane head butt. In the gold medal game, Italian defenseman Marco Materazzi was head butted by France superstar Zinedine Zidane because of racial exchanges between the two. This incident spiralled into a frenzy of television segments, articles, and local bar talk. Somehow politics and beliefs cannot be separated from any professional sports game, and people like Cherry continue to push the envelope with racial slurs and tough masculine chatter.

Players, fans, and corporations each contribute enormously to the success and failure of a professional sports team. Racial slurs are often exchanged as currency in the sports sphere, and trash talk has its own place on ice and in the locker-room as a psychological tool. In January 2004, Cherry indirectly called Francophones and Europeans wimps for wearing a visor (eye shield). And, it was no surprise in April 2004 when the CBC was uncertain about renewing Cherry's contract for *Coach's Corner*. This decision was a direct result of Cherry's comment, "Most of the guys that wear them are Europeans and French guys" (Cherry, 2004). Unfortunately, this was not the first xenophobic remark made by Cherry nor would it be the last. It did however cause uproar in the Francophone community and triggered the *Official Languages Commissioner* Dyane Adam to launch a formal investigation into Cherry's comments. This action consequently forced the CBC to react and impose a seven-second delay for *HNIC*, as a means of censorship. This was the Canadian version of the famous *Super Bowl* "wardrobe malfunction", with much less glimmer and glitz. The CBC later released a statement by Vice President Harold Redekopp saying that, [the CBC] categorically rejects and denounces his opinions, while at the same time acknowledging that Cherry has been an important part of the Canadian hockey scene as a player, coach and commentator over the past five decades (CBC Sports, 2004). Despite the hype and exposure Cherry received during January 2004, a majority of Canadians agreed with him, and his point was further proven when exactly one week later CBC Sports released an online analysis and survey indicating that 59 per cent of Europeans wear visors and 55 per cent from Québec compared to just 20 per cent of North Americans born outside Québec (CBC Sports, 2004). More often than not, when Cherry speaks a truth, he is ignored or silenced (when he is in fact right), and on many occasions merely reflects what most Canadians are too embarrassed to say. He is kept on air even if he is a complete contradiction to the CBC image of promoting multiculturalism and social awareness.

Cherry is a thorn in the CBC side and at the same time an essential character, one whom is needed in order to survive. *HNIC* still remains the most popular weekly sports program in Canada, averaging more than one million viewers every Saturday evening. Cherry plays a huge role in these numbers. Some tune out when Cherry appears, but most tune in to see and hear him on *Couch's Corner* (CBC Your Space, 2004). The CBC keeps Cherry because of his ability to draw in viewers, stir emotion and create reactions, which in turn attracts viewers, although sacrificing

the CBC's actual mandate. This mandate claims that the programming provided by the corporation should, among other things, actively contribute to the flow and exchange of cultural expression, and reflect the multicultural and multiracial nature of Canada (CBC Mandate, 1991). Cherry contributes to the flow and exchange of information, even if the CBC disagrees with his ideologies, and political stance. He often opens up a discourse that many journalists and television personalities deliberately choose to ignore.

For example, in 2003 Cherry openly showcased his support for the American invasion in Iraq, a topic seldom discussed on Canadian television. He was immediately hushed when the CBC chose to remove that particular clip in the *Couch's Corner* online archives. A large part of his comment was a direct consequence of him acting on impulse and needing to reassure the audience of his masculinity, something that Kevin Kumashiro calls a "relentless test." In a world of hyper-sexuality and masculinity overdose, it [masculinity] has a "marketplace quality" insofar as a male needs to demonstrate to other males aggressiveness, competitiveness, and excellence in a number of areas, including athletic performance, physical fitness, sexual activity, and social networking in order to be considered "masculine" (Kumashiro, 2000). Cherry is the dominant White hegemonic male that the Western world feels the need to associate with in order to reassure themselves and their beliefs. His cultural capital is a large part of what keeps him on-air and in your living rooms every Saturday evening, and with this power he does very little to promote multiculturalism and multiracialism. In fact he deliberately attacks other countries and claims White Canadian supremacy with his tough masculine monologues about violence and the style of hockey he promotes—"rock'em sock'em" toughness. He promotes violence because he feels it has a place in the sport, and is reassured when we applaud and embrace violence. Again, Cherry reflects what already exists in our society, and our fascination with blood, fights and any form of violence has become a voyeuristic need. In 2004, Todd Bertuzzi sucker-punched Colorado Avalanche center Steve Moore causing him to sustain three fractured neck vertebrae, facial cuts, and a severe concussion. Cherry condemned Bertuzzi's action, claiming that Bertuzzi's episode "hurt hockey" and suggested that if you have a beef with somebody, and you want to do something, [you settle it] face-to-face, you do not sucker punch ever from behind (CBC Sports, 2004). Most Canadian applauded Bertuzzi and since the event happened, unsurprisingly tribute groups have been created on FaceBook, which promote his actions. Violence has often been seen as an expected component of the game, an essential dimension of hockey culture and more particularly the Canadian tradition (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993, p. 176). Indeed, on the national level we have often characterized our game by the rough and tumble (or in the words of Don Cherry, "rock'em sock'em") nature of the games and stereotyped other countries (particularly European nations) as being soft. Foremost among the detractors of violence in hockey is Don Cherry.

Ultimately, Don Cherry is an instructive icon. He represents Canadian hopes,

dreams, and failures. As we unravel this tightly woven text of cultural contradiction, we arrive at the core of a man who offers us insight and his version of truth. Cherry is an important aspect of the Canadian image; through him we see what is missing, [and] the fact that Don Cherry, a hockey commentator, is the best-known public face of the national broadcaster is demonstrative of how little interest Canadian television mandarins have in multiculturalism (Beaty & Sullivan, 2006). Canadians are quick to claim that we live in a rich tapestry of multiculturalism, bilingualism, and cultural identity, and although Cherry does not represent all of Canada, his voice echoes with a large majority of Canadians who identify with him. It is therefore important to analyse people like Cherry, and to learn from their actions and choices. Sometimes we need to listen to annoying and loud voices in order to regain an understanding of who we truly are and to make changes.

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