

## RESEARCH

# See No Evil, Print No Evil: The Criminalization of Free Speech in *DMZ*

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This article examines contemporary notions on free speech and the criminalisation of journalistic expression since 9/11, via discussion of Brian Wood's *DMZ* comics (DC Vertigo). Free speech and the importance of a free press are widely accepted notions, yet journalistic and artistic freedom is arguably under attack in our post-9/11 world (Ash, 2016; Article 19, 2007). State responses to global terror threats have criminalised free speech, particularly speech seen as 'glorifying' or 'supporting' terrorism via anti-terror or restrictive media laws. This article examines these issues via *DMZ*'s discussion of a second American civil war in which freedom of the press has all but disappeared, arguing that *DMZ*'s 'War on Terror' narrative and depiction of controlled news access serve as allegories for contemporary free speech restrictions. *DMZ* illustrates contemporary concerns about a perceived social problem in its representation of corruption, abuse of power and restrictions on the public's right to know.

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**Keywords:** 9/11; censorship; free speech; human rights; press freedom

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## Welcome to the DMZ

This article examines contemporary notions on free speech and the criminalisation of journalistic expression in a post-9/11 world via discussion of Brian Wood and Riccardo Burchielli's *DMZ* comics (DC Vertigo November 2005 to February 2012). Exploring the reporting of a fictionalised war on terror through the eyes of a young journalist embedded within a nominally demilitarised zone, *DMZ* critically examines how reporting of terrorist threats and official 'War on Terror' narratives are manipulated and subject to social construction. Free speech and the importance of a free press are widely accepted and explicit within various international human rights instruments. The rights of journalists to comment on matters of social importance

have been substantially strengthened through scrutiny by the courts which have continually upheld the notion that there should be minimal state interference with the free press (Nurse 2013). Yet journalistic and artistic freedom are widely under attack in our post-9/11 world (Ash, 2016; Article 19, 2007) and comics have begun to embrace this notion. The reality that free speech carries with it responsibilities not to abuse that right sets up a potential conflict between the public interest and the needs of national security. State responses to global terror threats, including various European anti-terrorism laws, have effectively criminalised free speech, particularly speech seen as 'glorifying' or 'supporting' terrorism, via anti-terror or restrictive media laws that provide for new forms of censorship on grounds of national security and the prevention of terrorism.

The question of free speech and censorship is inextricably linked with the comics industry. Both historical attempts to limit publication (Wertham, 1999) and contemporary censorship and attempts to restrict comics' access through library bans and reader/publisher prosecution under obscenity laws (CBLDF 2016) illustrate how comics are objects of legal regulation and (mis)use of law to enforce dominant ideological/moral paradigms. Comics' consideration of the conflict of rights and freedoms has arguably expanded since 9/11, particularly in respect of 'the preoccupation with justice that manifests as an ongoing tension between public safety and individual rights' (Phillips and Strobl 2015: 110). Contemporary comics' consideration of journalistic free speech operates in a post-9/11 environment where journalistic characters 'have evolved into more full-bodied roles: weak or vain, blustery or cynical, realistic or at least somewhat more credible for twenty-first century audiences' (Knight 2009: 139). This article examines these issues via discussion of DC's *DMZ* which imagines a future in which freedom of the press has all but disappeared.

### **The DMZ, War on Terror and Censorship**

Set in the near future, *DMZ* imagines a second American civil war which erupts after the US government, bogged down in overseas adventurism, 'mistakenly neglects the very real threat of anti-establishment militias scattered across the 50 states' (Wood et al. 2008: 6). When Middle America rises up and violently fights back against

the dictatorial authoritarianism of the federal government and the dehumanising effects of American imperialism, America is plunged into a civil war between the Government-led United States and the secessionist Free States of America. Focusing on New York's demilitarised Manhattan zone (DMZ) and the war between the Free Armies, controlling New Jersey and the inland, and the United States, holding New York City's boroughs, the DMZ is largely seen through the eyes of photojournalist intern Matty Roth. Stranded in the DMZ when his news crew is attacked by 'friendly fire' Roth continues his assignment, discovering that the official line about the 'enemy' (the Free States) is not entirely truthful and that the news reaching the public is of questionable veracity.

This article argues that *DMZ's* 'War on Terror' depiction and its associated control of news access and reporting serve as allegories for contemporary free speech restrictions. *DMZ's* narrative provides an analysis of contemporary concerns about corruption, abuse of power and restrictions on the public's right to know. Wolk (2007: 20) identifies that 'when you look at a comic book, you're not seeing either the world or a direct representation of the world; what you're seeing is an interpretation or transformation of the world with aspects that are exaggerated, adapted or invented'. Comics are well-placed to deal with contemporary terrorism and free speech ideas in part because 'the extra-legal narratives that are common in mainstream comic books bypass the frustration of due process concerns' (Phillips and Strobl, 2015: 113). Thus comic book 'heroes' are able to engage with contemporary justice concerns in both an idealised and an explicit manner that sidesteps the banality of 'real' justice discourse. As Gustines notes, citing a *New York Times* Book Review, *DMZ's* scripts are 'full of acidic metaphors for American flag-waving and embedded reportage' (2006). *DMZ* posits not just that free speech is good nor that it must always be protected, but instead shows how journalistic ideals and the very notion of what free speech is about can shift within conflict zones and to suit contrasting ideologies.

Restrictions on conflict reporting are not new and reflect the notion that absolute free speech may not be desirable in times of conflict. As far back as the first World War, the UK's Defence of the Realm Act 1914 (DORA) contained a provision which specified that 'no person shall by word of mouth or in writing spread reports likely to

cause disaffection or alarm among any of His Majesty's forces or among the civilian population' (section 4 of the DORA (no 2) Regulations). Greenslade (2014) argues that in that conflict, 'rigid government control was exercised in conjunction with a complicit group of committed pro-war press proprietors' in essence ensuring that any negative reporting was strictly controlled. Seen primarily through Matty Roth's eyes, *DMZ* raises and illustrates contemporary concerns about pressing social problems in its representation of corruption within the military and political complex.

It explores abuse of power and restrictions on public information about the ongoing conflict set against the background of a fictionalised American civil war. In the introduction to Volume 3, *Public Works*, Cory Doctorow describes *DMZ* as an 'angry war comic that tells the other side of the war' (Wood and Burchielli, 2007: 4). It reflects Wolk's (2007) notion of exaggeration as a means to explore a real issue; here the notion that there is another side that runs counter to official 'War on Terror' discourse is integral to *DMZ*'s narrative. Author Brian Wood's focus on the lives of the *DMZ*'s inhabitants and the various factions operating in the civil war illustrates not only how information is controlled, as might be expected in times of war, but also how journalists and the flow of information are seen as problematic where their role of informing the public risks undermining public confidence in state agencies, the military and political leaders. *DMZ* makes explicit use of violence, both visually and within its narrative, and its focus on the lives (and deaths) of both combatants and non-combatants extends the work beyond that of 'mere' comic book entertainment to function primarily as a 'War on Terror' narrative (Araújo, 2015; Philips and Strobl, 2013: 41–42).

### **The Journalist as Protagonist**

Greenslade (2014) suggests that it is almost unthinkable today to think of journalists being arrested solely for reporting on the war. *DMZ* explicitly explores the role of the journalist adopting a contemporary spin on how the principle of press freedom, enshrined within international human rights instruments since 1948 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, can operate. The basic conception on freedom of expression was formalised by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

(*ICCPR*) Article 19 of which specifies that everyone has the right to hold opinions and that the right of freedom of expression includes the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers or medium.

In essence Article 19 of the *ICCPR*, which is about freedom of speech generally, provides the framework for a free press, given that the press is a primary mechanism through which people receive and impart information. Similar provisions exist within Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (*ECHR*) which also allows for interference with freedom of expression where 'necessary' for national security or law and order purposes or to protect public morals and reputation (Art 10(2)). A central aspect of *DMZ*'s narrative is the manner in which information and ideas are manipulated by both sides, reflecting a contemporary reality in which journalistic free speech is increasingly being controlled, allegedly on grounds of national security (Radsch 2016). Phillips and Strobl (2006: 318) note that 'government and law enforcement corruption occurred in the plots of a majority of comic books' reflecting the notion that those entrusted with the job of maintaining public security are often unsuccessful and untrustworthy. Visually, *DMZ* explores the difference between the reality on the ground explicit in its violent imagery, and the 'official' version of the war relayed in news overlays and text boxes that convey positive reporting on the war. Pro-war reporting is thus evident in *DMZ*, as in real life, and the reader is in part being asked to distinguish between the information conveyed in the official and pro-war discourse and the more negative depiction of its reality on the ground which unfolds in the comic's narrative.

Protagonist Matty Roth joins the first news crew to have access to Manhattan, five years into the war and three days into a tentative ceasefire. Flying in aboard a (United States) military helicopter, Roth is part of a team planning to produce a five part series on what life is really like for people living in the DMZ. However, as one of his military protectors informs him on the way in, there is 'zero fuckin' security in the city except what the locals set up on their own. The rules change from block to block, neighborhood to neighborhood' (Wood and Burchiello, 2007: 12). Indeed, Roth becomes stranded in the DMZ when his crew comes under attack almost immediately and rather than being engaged in the ceasefire as the outside world believes,

the DMZ (as illustrated by **Figure 1**) proves instead to be an active war zone with both sides continuing with hostilities.

Samuel Johnson is reported to have said 'among the calamities of war may be jointly numbered the diminution of the love of truth, by the falsehoods which interest dictates and credulity encourages' (from *The Idler*, 1758). Roth tells Zee, the young medic who befriends him, that American citizens are mostly told about insurgents and the violent nature of the uprising and are unaware that so many civilians continue to live 'peacefully' in the DMZ. Zee exclaims, 'that figures. Ignorance wins every time. That's why your stupid fucking war will never end' (Wood and Burchielli, 2006: 26). Wood explores the notion of truth being a casualty of war as Matty Roth finds that both the United States and the Free States seek to control public access to information and to deny full reporting of what happens within the DMZ. Both sides also spread falsehoods that they desire kept from the wider public. Indeed throughout the narrative Roth, the only reporter freely operating within the DMZ



**Figure 1:** Map of the DMZ. Wood, B. and Burchielli, R. (2006) *DMZ: On the Ground*. (New York: DC, 7). © 2006 DC Comics.

with the (eventual) co-operation of the locals, is frequently detained or held hostage as a response by both sides to the perceived threat from his reporting. However, *DMZ* establishes throughout that Roth is no corporate newsman pursuing a particular network-driven agenda. Indeed, he is established early on as an intern who has yet to be fully accepted within the broadcast media industry; thus his impartiality and freedom from corruption is implied from the outset, although an early reference is made to his father having pulled strings to gain him the assignment (Wood and Burchiello, 2006: 12).

Within its narrative *DMZ* reflects wider concerns about the obligation on the press to act responsibly and their ability to do so. The ICCPR allows for there to be restrictions on the press and the exercise of the free speech right in order to: a) respect the rights or reputations of others (including politicians); or b) for the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals. Censorship by public authorities can, thus, be imposed in certain circumstances, in accordance with the provisions of the ICCPR or regional human rights instruments that implement ICCPR principles such as the ECHR. The notion of right followed by (justified) exceptions is a common structure in human rights instruments and the extent to which interferences with free speech happens in the interests of national security is a core narrative concern within *DMZ*. Allison (2012) notes that journalists provide strong central characters for comic series 'as their occupation demands that they seek new stories and their articles make the perfect narrative devices for scene-setting'. Yet Matty Roth's character arguably also reflects recent changes in the role of the journalist within comic narratives from observer to direct protagonist where themes of security, corruption and authoritarianism come to the fore, particularly in post-9/11 'War on Terror' and social conflict literary narratives.

Phillips and Strobl (2013: 43) note that 'comic books published immediately after 9/11 reflected changing sensibilities about the role of heroes' and that differing notions of heroism and understanding of contemporary threats are reflected in terrorism-related narratives in comics. As Ross (cited in Knight 2009: 140) explains, 'the reporter is somewhat the conscience of the people, being concerned and bringing attention to things.' Thus Roth's viewpoint as the outsider looking into the war

is integral to understanding both the importance of free speech and the harmful impact of restrictions on the public's right to know, particularly where the wider public is denied knowledge of what is being done in their name. Accordingly, *DMZ* continues the tradition of comic book characters fighting for the meaning of the American way of life, while inhabiting a twenty-first century conception on how and in what manner comics should address issues like military imperialism and terrorism.

Where freedom of speech is restricted, various supreme courts have frequently considered the context in which limitations are imposed (Arden, 2009). The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) for example, when considering the free speech provisions contained in Article 10 of the ECHR has said that:

Not only does the press have the task of imparting such [public interest] information and ideas; the public also has a right to receive them. Were it otherwise, the press would be unable to play its vital role of "public watchdog" (*Observer and Guardian v UK* (Application No. 13585/88) [1992] 14 EHRR 153).

Restrictions on free speech thus raise concerns about state censorship, especially in matters of security, crime and terrorism. *DMZ* illustrates the contemporary idea that effective free speech provides not only a 'marketplace' for ideas and public discussion, but for people to express themselves as part of their right of self-realisation (Arden, 2009). Wood and Burchielli show how civilian populations affected by war are often denied basic rights (e.g. to clean water, food and free movement) but knowledge of their circumstances is often a forgotten consequence of conflict except where reporters and citizen bloggers draw public attention to what is happening on the ground. Thus free speech and the right of investigative journalists to report on abuses takes on increased importance in conflict zones as does the use of social media to document stories marginalised or ignored by the mainstream media.

However, free speech is not a universal unqualified right and in some jurisdictions (e.g. within the 47-state Council of Europe covered by the ECHR) law allows



interference with the right in certain circumstances, if done in accordance with the law and with what is considered 'necessary' for national security purposes (amongst other possible justifications). Elsewhere, different considerations apply and the principle of no prior restraint on press publication was established in the US via *New York Times Co. v United States* (1971) 403 U.S. 713, where the US Supreme Court questioned the constitutional validity of attempts at prior restraint. *DMZ* thus examines the role of the press and the legitimacy of restrictions on the press within the confines of conflict reporting where special considerations might be said to apply and where arguably the United States 'has a long and unfortunate history of over-reacting to the perceived dangers of wartime' (Stone 2009: 955). It also examines the nature of censorship and official 'War on Terror' narratives. Debates around freedom of speech and the legitimacy of restricting, distorting or manipulating the news in order to serve national security purposes is also explicitly explored by Wood and Burchielli's narrative.

### **Every Day is 9/11: America's Second Civil War**

The fictionalised second American civil war serves as a device through which American imperialism and its impact on the lives of its citizens can be explored. Using Matty Roth's journalistic eyes as the primary narrative viewpoint, Wood and Burchielli show how life in the DMZ differs from the official narrative of a civilian population hostile to the United States. The effects of the war and the almost indiscriminate bombing of civilians are uncovered by Roth's investigation as he seeks to uncover the realities of life in the DMZ. As Roth states: 'save for the DMZ, this war's fought in bits and pieces all over the country. The Free States are an idea not a geographic entity. The same asymmetrical insurgent warfare that bogged down the US Military overseas is happening here' (Wood and Burchielli, 2007: 65). *DMZ* shows stark images of violence including the killing of soldiers and discarding of their corpses (see **Figure 2**) and almost casual use of force against a civilian population. The use of violent imagery is consistent with Young's (2010: 7–13) notion of 'crime images' in visual media influencing how individuals respond to violent or traumatic events and make meaning of them. Images of warfare in all of its stark, graphic reality, e.g. the killing of women



Figure 2: Wood, B. and Burchielli, R. (2006) *DMZ: On the Ground*. (New York: DC Comics, 25). © 2006 DC Comics. [Emphasis in the original].

and children, images of torture and abuse of the civilian population, bring home the reality of war and also manipulate the emotions of *DMZ's* reader.

While 'War on Terror' narratives often discuss remote actions carried out overseas, situating the narrative within the US requires readers to consider the impact of war on an identifiable population, citizens like 'us'. Accordingly, *DMZ* illustrates not only the extent to which war can go wrong, but the consequences for the civilian population and for the state and the implications of public support for further conflict when this happens. Within the context of an American civil war, demonising the enemy (which for the US Government in *DMZ's* narrative means the Free States) is integral to ensuring public support. However, *DMZ* identifies early on that distinguishing who constitutes the enemy is not always clear-cut, as his friend Zee explains to Roth when they return to the initial helicopter crash site to retrieve equipment (see **Figure 2**).

MATTY: Whoa. What're they doing?

ZEE: Pulling out the computers. One of 'em will take it across the Hudson to the Free Armies and sell it as Intel. Probably. Or just as likely sell it back to American troops at the checkpoint.

MATTY: They'd just help the *Enemy* like that?

ZEE: Your *sides* don't mean much around here/Everyone feels like the *Enemy* to us.

MATTY: What'd they do with the bodies?

ZEE: What do you think's hanging there? *Laundry*?

Visually the images reinforce the everyday nature of the conflict and the normalization of its violence. Zee is required to point out to Matty that the bodies of slain soldiers are clearly on display (see **Figure 2**) and that the reality of the conflict is seen differently by the indigenous population. Zee's central point is that the official distinction between the two sides is less clear cut from the perspective of the civilian

population affected by the conflict. However, the reference to 'American troops' provides some recognition of the United States forces as representing America as the aggressor and the Free Armies as referencing a movement seeking freedom from the federal government.

### **Recontextualising Free Speech: Political Free Speech in a post-9/11 World**

The current climate of free speech is one in which a global media (including internet sites, blogs and online newspapers) comment and opinion reach beyond the traditional borders of national news and newspaper media. Following the 9/11 attacks, terrorism attacks in London (7/7 2005), Madrid (2005) and Paris (2015), anti-terrorism laws arguably impact significantly on free speech through the creation of new laws on the 'incitement' or 'glorification' of terrorism which could capture journalistic expression. Speech seen to, either directly or indirectly, encourage terrorism has been restricted by some states under the guise of national security, a narrative element integral to *DMZ*. Attempts to remove or block websites with controversial material have been made and a contemporary context exists in which journalistic free speech is being controlled.

Resolution 1624 of the UN Security Council specifies that UN Member States are required to prohibit by law incitement to commit terrorism acts. The 'European approach' is one of explicit legal restrictions on freedom of speech through the introduction of laws that focus on the content of the speech and which allow for free speech to be legitimately interfered with in line with the restrictions laid out in Article 10(2) of the ECHR (Nurse, 2013). The US approach is arguably one of indirect restriction in the respect that the American approach 'does not allow for content-based and viewpoint-based limitations on freedom of speech' (Barak-Erez and Scharia, 2011: 14). Criminalising incitement to terrorism is achieved through wide terrorism laws which historically have not been intended to apply to journalists given that a free press provides a means through which governments and the abuse of power can be scrutinised and exposed, and dissenting voices heard.

However, the extent to which states can (and do) interfere with free speech and the free press is an issue of contemporary concern, particularly within 'War on Terror' discourse. *DMZ* examines these issues, explicitly detailing how state restrictions on and scrutiny of the press, challenges to publication on the grounds of public order under anti-terror and libel laws and to protect reputations, all contribute towards restricting public access to the realities of war. This reflects the realities of contemporary society in which a developing body of case law exists which indirectly clarifies the limits of journalistic free speech in a range of jurisdictions (See, for example *Stoll v Switzerland* (Application No. 69698/01) [2008] 47 EHRR 59, *Herrera v Costa Rica* (2004) and *Leroy v France* which is discussed later in this article). NGO Article 19 (2009) in its submission to the 91<sup>st</sup> Session of the UN Human Rights Committee argued that the UK's Terrorism Act 2006 lacks clarity and has a 'chilling effect' on journalists in the EU and beyond.

Criticisms of these free speech restrictions include concerns that journalistic freedom is being curbed by state prosecutions against journalists and the media, resulting in a public that is less well informed (Freedom of the Press 2009). *DMZ* explicitly explores this examining the operation of major news outlets (here the fictional Liberty News) that operate in an increasingly global environment where comment and analysis extends beyond the original country of publication bringing journalists into conflict with the law of other states in those circumstances where controversial material is likely to reach a wider audience. In this context, states may feel justified in introducing additional measures to restrict, on the one hand, media operations and, on the other hand, what may actually be published or broadcast. Wood and Burchielli's narrative reflects contemporary debates about the extent to which states have criminalised speech considered to be 'supporting' terrorism.

Problems of interpretation and in defining what should be prohibited as speech supporting terrorism means that some journalists may inadvertently find themselves the subject of legal action depending on both the context and content of their reporting (Burrell 2015). Prosecution of journalists for criticising military action is now a reality, and *DMZ* explicitly acknowledges this in Matty Roth's eventual trial,

arguably for revealing the reality of the DMZ's conflict and the associated state corruption. Even though bodies like the EU Parliament consider that criminalising conduct by using vague terms like 'glorification' or 'promotion' of terrorism is likely to breach the right to freedom of expression (European Parliament 2008), such laws exist. There are also dangers inherent in states' criminalising the expression of ideas they do not like. Contemporary anti-terror legislation is such that journalistic commentary critical of political leaders and urging civil disobedience could unwittingly be classed as incitement to terrorism even where this is not the journalist's intent.

For example, in *Sener v Turkey* (Application No 26680/95) [2003] 37 EHRR 34, a European human rights case, journalist Sener was imprisoned and fined for disseminating 'separatist propaganda' against the Turkish State. Sener owned and edited weekly review *Haberde Yorumda Gerçek* ('The Truth of News and Comments') which published an article critical of military action. Istanbul's State Security Court held this committed the offence of disseminating separatist propaganda against the State contrary to section 8 of Turkey's Prevention of Terrorism Act 1991. Sener received six months' imprisonment and a fine of 50,000,000 Turkish liras and complained that her conviction amounted to an infringement of her right to freedom of expression. The ECtHR agreed, accepting that while the interference in Sener's free speech was allowed for by Turkish law, the Court did not agree that the interference was 'necessary in a democratic society' for the aims of national security and protecting the public to be achieved. The ECtHR specifically referred to the essential role of the press in ensuring the proper functioning of political democracy. While the press should not overstep its bounds or interfere with the vital interests of the state, e.g. national security, it was nevertheless incumbent on the press to impart information and ideas on political issues, including divisive ones.

This theme is integral to *DMZ* and the question of how far journalists can go before their actions can be criminalised. Matty Roth's journey through the DMZ extends beyond simply reporting on life in the DMZ to alleged complicity in the actions of militia and rebel groups. Restrictions on the free speech right's 'social purpose' are often legitimate on grounds of national security and, for example, the ECtHR has ruled that a fine imposed for a cartoon published a few days after the

9/11 terrorist attacks and which appeared to support them was not a violation of free speech rights. *Leroy v France* (Application No. 36109/03; judgment of 2 October 2008, [2009] ECC 5) concerned the publication of a cartoon representing the attack on the World Trade Centre's twin towers, with a caption saying 'We have all dreamt of it... Hamas did it.' The drawing was published in the Basque weekly newspaper *Ekaitza* just two days after 9/11 (*Ekaitza*, 13 September 2001) and French cartoonist Denis Leroy was convicted of complicity in condoning terrorism.

In considering Leroy's appeal the Court noted that discussion of the tragic events of 11 September 2001 was in the public interest, and Leroy argued that his real intention was political and activist expression, communicating his anti-Americanism through a satirical image and illustrating the decline of American imperialism. But the Court considered that the drawing was not limited to criticism of American imperialism, but its caption supported and glorified its violent destruction by expressing Leroy's moral support for those (whom he presumed to be) responsible for the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Clearly the content of reporting and the public interest involved are factors when considering whether any interference by the state is justified. While *Leroy* may be a freak occurrence, overtly political statements made in the aftermath of a terrorist attack that might be seen as condoning or supporting terrorism, can hence be subject to justified state interference. Thus as Matty Roth's involvement and commentary on life in the DMZ develops beyond simple reporting to incorporate approval of and support for those engaged in conflict with the United States, it risks becoming reporting of a kind now prohibited by certain anti-terrorism laws.

### **The DMZ, Comic Book Narrative on Propaganda and the 'War on Terror'**

*DMZ* examines 'othering' and the demonisation of an enemy holding different ideals and values but invites readers to consider the extent to which this may be an artificial construction. Comics can be a means of knowing the world and cementing understanding of complex issues such as the realities of the 'War on Terror'. Comics routinely examine crime, justice and social order narratives. Fantastical narratives in particular can allow readers to engage in 'exploring, in a safe and controlled context, what is impossible or too dangerous or forbidden' given that doing so 'is a crucial

tool in accepting the limits of reality' (Jones 2008). 'Mature' comics such as *DMZ* also provide a means to explore events such as the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States which generated feelings of fear and paranoia and also forced Americans to adjust to a new social order 'and to restructure their lives in a seemingly terror-dominated world' (Johnson, 2011).

The ultimate expression of this new reality is to bring the 'War on Terror' 'home' as opposed to being something primarily happening overseas. *DMZ* makes othering of those involved in challenges to the legitimacy of the federal government explicit as the 'enemy' is reflected in news reporting that suggests that 'Free Army soldiers have a well-deserved reputation for being indiscriminate and uncivilized when it comes to welfare in civilian areas. The official White House line brands Free Army soldiers as 'thugs and murderers' (Wood and Burchielli, 2006: 7). In reality, the reverse is true. This fictional US Army is shown as brutal and arguably incompetent, reflecting fears and a lack of trust in the contemporary military strategy against terrorism which arguably makes society less safe (Eger 2012).

*DMZ* shows Roth investigating an incident known as Day 204 when 198 peace protesters were shot down by 'twitchy' United States soldiers (Wood et al. 2008). The resultant military tribunals that took place three years after the event solely investigated the actions of the soldiers involved on the ground, with nobody further up the chain of command being tried for the event. Wood et al. show the ambiguous nature of the event via scenes that illustrate how the marching protestors resemble an army and how the soldiers on duty are unclear whether they are protestors, a funeral procession or something else. The massacre occurs when Sergeant Nunez, the officer in charge, orders his squad to open fire as a consequence of seeing a gun in the crowd. Nunez explains to Roth that the event took place at the start of the war when soldiers were unsure who the enemy was much less where they were. Nunez (Wood et al. 2008: 53–4) confirms that orders were 'kept simple to allow for broad application', further pointing out 'it was an *armed* mob in a *war zone* with unmistakable *hostile* intent. What the fuck do you *want* from me, huh?' An exasperated Nunez states 'you *gave* us the tools....Get out of the *fucking* way and let us do our job' (emphasis in original).



Roth suggests that Nunez is simply sticking to a script, reiterating the official narrative irrespective of whatever the tribunal and Roth's investigative journalism may uncover. However he observes that Nunez is convincing and clearly believes he did the right thing. A counter-narrative is discussed later in the 'Friendly Fire' storyline (collected in volume 4, Wood et al. 2008) where, as **Figure 3** shows, Roth in a matter-of-fact conversation discusses Day 204 with the 'King', a US army soldier who has been AWOL for over a year and who now carries out his own neighbourhood watch operation.

THE KING: The real tragedy that day wasn't the murdered protestors. Day 204 was the day *America died*. Whatever is left now is just the nervous system *twitching*.

MATTY: I've been talking to people for the last two days who think 198 dead is *pretty fucking tragic*, you know?

THE KING: No doubt. They were *murdered* straight up.

MATTY: You think so?

THE KING: That early in the war we were so fucked up we shot at *anything* we saw. Lost dogs looked like insurgents. We triple-shot rotting corpses just in case. *Collateral damage*, Ya know? War's a bitch like that.

MATTY: Shit.

The 'King's' explanation casts doubt on the efficiency of the military operation, its leadership and the preparedness of the troops for what they encountered. Much like the real 'War on Terror' there is doubt about the extent to which the strategy will be effective.

### **Criminalising Journalistic Free Speech: Preliminary Conclusions**

Free speech is generally governed by international conventions, national constitutions and the system of protection of fundamental rights and freedoms that is consistently upheld by the courts (Varju 2013). But in times of war or where the threat of terrorism is concerned, these conceptions on civil liberties are often suspended. *DMZ* examines a range of issues around things society is often uncomfortable discussing.



Figure 3: Wood, B. Burchielli, R. and Fox, N. (2008). *DMZ: Friendly Fire*. (New York: DC Comics, 73), © 2008 DC Comics. Emphasis in the original.

These include: the extent to which information is kept from the public in order to ensure continued support for military action; whether it is helpful for society to know the full impact of war on civilian populations; and the extent to which the official narrative on war may differ from the reality on the ground.

*DMZ* asks the difficult question of whether we really want to know what goes on in war and answers it by showing one version of that reality that we can understand given that the people on both sides in the fictional conflict are just like 'us'. Ultimately in *DMZ* Matty Roth ends up in prison, arguably for uncovering the reality of contemporary war and its underlying political justifications and for asking questions that the state might prefer are never asked, let alone answered (Wood et al. 2011). While we arguably need investigative journalists more than ever, *DMZ* reflects a world in which their ability to examine the extent to which we are lied to about the wars fought in our name is increasingly under attack.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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