

Symposium on Projecting Geography in the Public Domain in Canada.

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“Geography and the Media: Strengthening the Relationship” - Response to discussion paper of Prof. Barry Wellar by Peter Desbarats.

In 1950 when I first entered a newspaper newsroom as a 17-year-old copy boy, it would have been a relatively simple and very short task to suggest a sure-fire method of attracting media attention and getting space in the news media for one’s particular interests. The first step in this process would be to take out one’s wallet. The second step would be to fork over the required amount of cash to a selected journalist. The third step would be to read the flattering news report that would eventually follow the first two steps.

I’m not exaggerating. It was as simple as that as I soon discovered when I graduated from tearing teletype copy and getting coffee for editors and reporters to being a police reporter, then feature writer and ultimately a political journalist. I still vividly remember one of my first lessons in this “hard knocks” school of journalism from an experienced city editor, my immediate boss at The Gazette in Montreal. My assignment was to accompany the editor to a very classy dinner party in a penthouse apartment in Upper Westmount owned by - quote- the biggest stockbroker in Canada - unquote.

What I knew then about high finance was negligible but that didn’t matter. The editor explained to me that the “biggest stockbroker” was a very fat man. That was the angle, get it? The editor knew that even at that early stage in my career, I could make a story about almost anything, or even nothing for that matter.

I was flattered by the invitation but worried about one aspect of the evening. None of my few girlfriends, at that age, seemed adequate for such a grand occasion. So I rented a tux, borrowed the mistress of an artist friend of mine (I had recently written a profile of him for the paper, so he owed me one), arrived at the designated apartment with my rent-a-mistress on my arm, rang the bell and promptly shook hands with the man in the tux who opened the door. He was the butler.

The next day I arrived for work early, wrote my story and handed it, as I had been instructed, directly to the city editor. When the first newspapers arrived from the pressroom in the basement that evening, there was my story on the financial page and a large photo of the gargantuan stockbroker. There also was the managing editor, paper in hand, yelling at the city editor to come into his office immediately. Within a few minutes the presses were stopped and the story was yanked. Somewhat to my surprise, the city editor wasn't and no one ever mentioned the story to me again.

During my four years on The Gazette, I happily followed the rules. If someone offered me money, I took it and tried, most of the time, to provide value for it. Even charitable agencies used to paperclip cash to their press releases. Reporters assigned to the press gallery of the Quebec Assembly received an annual stipend from the government euphemistically called a "stationery allowance." I still remember John Diefenbaker's shock and outrage in the early 1960s when he discovered that a Quebec organizer at one of his election rallies in that province was handing out cash-filled envelopes to reporters from across Canada who were covering his campaign.

But that was almost 50 years ago and in Quebec. Nothing like that was in evidence in

Winnipeg where I subsequently worked for a few years. When I returned to Montreal in 1960, everything was changing in Quebec. And I think I'm correct in stating that not one journalist has been cited so far before the Gomery inquiry for accepting bribes although I can't say the same for advertising executives, senior bureaucrats, party officials and other members of our ruling elite.

In the past 50 years, there is one aspect of media relations that hasn't changed. People in all professions and businesses, from politics to non-profit agencies to sports organizations and everything in between, place a high value on getting space in the media. If anything, it's become even more important than it was in the days when news media simply meant newspapers. No one would argue with the organizers of this symposium when they state that "the use and portrayal of geography by the media is an integral part of any discussion of the subject's image in the public domain." How to raise and embellish this image has just become more complex as media has become more diversified.

Throughout my own career I have been a small but active participant in that process. When I first entered that newsroom in Montreal it looked more or less like newsrooms of the previous 50 years. I had no idea that the next 50 would dramatically transform journalism. I never imagined at the outset that I would ever work for anything but print media. But it was less than 10 years later that I was writing scripts for television documentaries in Winnipeg. Even then, no one clearly envisaged the dominant role that television would soon play as a news medium. By the mid-1960s I was working full-time for CBC television and my print journalism had become a freelance spare-time activity. I had joined the lucky first generation of journalists who had the option of alternating between radio, television and print with television leading the

way in terms of salaries.

But an even bigger technological shift was just over the horizon. In 1980-81, when I left print and TV journalism to serve as associate research director of the Royal Commission on Newspapers, I produced a research volume on “Newspapers and Computers” for the commission. Although I had access to the best experts in information technology in Canada, the United States and Europe, none of them even dreamed at that time of something like the Internet.

In 1981 I moved from the commission to this university and became deeply involved in looking at news media from the outside. Over the years I’ve also done my share of media coaching, writing and making speeches about the media and consulting for various groups ranging from large corporations to cultural organizations and in fields as diverse as waste disposal, civil liberties, prison management and airlines. All of them were asking the same question as the main one posed by this symposium: How can you use news media to increase your visibility in the public domain and to better inform the public about your own organization and its objectives?

The answers to this overly simplified question, of course, aren’t either simple or easy.

Prof. Wellar’s extremely useful paper demonstrates this. Drawing on his own extensive experience and that of others who have contributed to his paper, he has provided a systematic approach to a problem that is applicable not only to geographers but to many other disciplines, professions and businesses. My own usefulness in this project, I hope, lies in making a few marginal comments drawn from my own experience.

The first relates to a question of identity that seems to me to be more acute for geographers than other academic disciplines. There are references to this in Prof. Wellar’s paper

and I'm sure it's a familiar subject to this audience. I can't be the only Canadian who is uncertain about the very definition of geography and the special skills of geographers. After 15 years on a campus shared with geographers and with several geographers among my closest friends, I would still be hard-pressed to come up with a definition of geography that is more specific and useful than my dictionary's "the science of the earth and its life, especially the description of land, sea, air, and the distribution of plant and animal life, including man and his industries." Combined with this, in my own mind, are vague memories of something called "geography" in elementary school that seemed to be composed primarily of lists that had to be memorized - lists of lakes and oceans, of countries and their capitals, and so on, endlessly.

But when my own ignorance is confronted by Prof. Wellar's list of "terms and concepts that underlie the work of the geographic community," geography suddenly broadens to include a huge array of concerns, any one of which seems to be enough to sustain a separate discipline such as economics, physics, environmental studies, political science or agronomy, to name only a few..

At first glance, trying to devise a communications strategy for a discipline as diverse as geography would seem to be a public relations nightmare. One of the basic steps of any communications strategy is to simplify the objectives of, for instance, a political party or corporation, to express their aims in as few words as possible and to devise easily identifiable organizational symbols. It doesn't seem to me that this would be an easy task for geography and geographers. On the other hand, the very range of geographers' interests means that they can focus relatively quickly on problems that are high on the public and political agenda. This flexibility and topicality are illustrated by Prof. Wellar's list of media stories about geography. It

includes news stories about such “hot” media subjects as global warming, wildlife conservation, telecommuting, political amalgamation of cities and water pollution - subjects that most people would not automatically associate with geography. So there may be some advantages to this multiple-natured identity. If the subjects studied by geographers are of obvious compelling relevance to many people, then the traditional academic source of this information may not be all that important. It may be almost a subliminal factor but none the less positive for being in the background.

Prof. Wellar’s paper deals with geography and not media studies but from my viewpoint, it would be useful to link it to more sources of information about the media. Prof. Wellar unbundles the term “popular literature” by dividing it into categories such as “newspapers, magazines, newsletters, radio, television and the Internet.” This is chronologically correct, in terms of the emergence of various media, but hardly accurate as a guide to their significance. Many people still think of newspapers as the “senior” and most important news media but in reality the newspaper industry has been in decline for decades in terms of circulation in relation to population and share of total advertising revenues. Since the 1960s television has been the most influential news medium while radio, apart from the CBC, has declined as a source of news. It’s too early to evaluate the importance of the Internet as a news source, not to mention the impact of the Internet on the very definition of news, but obviously it is continuing to grow.

Prof. Wellar’s awareness of this development is expressed in one of his most interesting proposals: the creation of what he calls a “digital bridge” linking geographers and the public. He suggests that “the geographic community can call on library science and Internet expertise to create an electronic means for connecting the media with media-active members and

organizations of the geographic community.” Part of this “bridge” would be a “digital facility for posting and accessing media stories involving geographers” to inform geographers and journalists about who is saying what on television.

This suggestion and others by Prof. Wellar assumes that there will be a ready market among journalists for this kind of information. A word of caution here. While most journalists welcome efforts to provide them with accessible quality information, their conditions of work don’t always make it possible for them to take advantage of these. This is particularly true for the majority of journalists working for medium-size and smaller newspapers, local commercial television stations and most magazines. While The Globe and Mail, the CBC and possibly the National Post provide the highest quality of journalism that Canadians have ever received, news media below this level have tended to deteriorate in recent decades. This has meant heavier workloads for their staffs and fewer opportunities for professional development.

Prof. Wellar identifies a “major need for training programs, including short courses and workshops - all with an online emphasis” to give geographers improved media skills. Journalists also require constant updating in such areas as legal education, economics, environmental science and international development. The graduate journalism program in this university once offered short courses for working journalists in all these subjects but they have been dropped or curtailed in recent years not because of a lack of interest on the part of journalists but because of a lack of support from employers. Because of media mergers over the years, only a few large media owners can now determine working conditions including professional development for an entire industry. This is another reason for supporting Prof. Wellar’s emphasis on creating a “digital bridge” between geographers and journalists.

He notes that many journalists, columnists, editorialists and media researchers are serious users of e-mail and mailing lists and that increasingly members of the media are making contact with geographers through web pages and e-mail. I'm sure that this is true. In my own field, most of my information about journalists and news media now comes through a list-serve operated by the Canadian Association of Journalists. It provides me with access to important developments in the industry, rumours about personnel changes, debates among journalists about media ethics and other matters and links to relevant articles from international sources that the Canadian journalists have posted.. Prof. Wellar's advocacy of similar techniques to bring geographer's work cheaply and effectively to the attention of more journalists and through them to a larger media audience should be supported by both geographers and journalists.