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THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

David Crane
Introduction

MR. CRANE: Well, I'd like to welcome everyone here tonight. We have two very interesting speakers. One who has just arrived. Anyway, I'd like to welcome everybody to this after dinner event. And what we're supposed to discuss tonight is whether or not it helps or hinders public awareness and understanding of each of our countries.

And in looking at this, I'm just going to say, make a few comments. And I promised Henry King, to help the evening along, I have two jokes. So, now, one challenge, seriously, that we face is the two countries are quite different. And the U.S is a country which has many difficult interests. And Canada is a country which is much more focused in a continental sense.

And I remembered an illustration of this at the World Economic Forum in the 1990s when the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement was being negotiated and Garth Drabinsky, a Canadian who was held in higher esteem then than now, I guess, asked Clayton Yeutter, then a U.S. Trade Representative, why it was that there was this intense raging debate in the Canadian media about the pros and cons of the Free Trade Agreement, while in the U.S. media there was virtually no mention of the fact that a Free Trade Agreement was being negotiated. Clayton very patiently explained that the U.S. had many interests to address, and the FTA was just one of many. And this is, in essence, a reality from the Canadian’s perspective we have to look at.

Canada has to compete for attention in the United States media. And if there’s no major issue, Canada is easy to go on to new things. Once in a while, government gets really worried about the lack of attention, then we intensify the seal hunt that helps us, and to the point where we can make the front page of the New York Times again.

Now, it’s interesting that in Washington this week, two very important visits by heads of countries, by the Israeli Prime Minister Sharon and the British Prime Minister Blair. Each of these visits is getting intensive television coverage. I've just come from a few days in Albuquerque at the Western Governors Association, so I was watching more American TV before I went to bed at night. And you can certainly see that in the media coverage these visits attract enormous media attention, because both visits carry important implications for U.S. foreign policy, quite profound, and it is an election year.
Now, our own Prime Minister is going to be in Washington at the end of the month to meet President Bush.¹ His visit will be to an almost frenzy of Canadian coverage before he goes, when he’s there, and then we’ll have an array of pontification as to whether it was a good visit, bad visit, did George W. Bush like him, did he like him better than John Chrétien, and all this stuff. I wonder if this visit will attract anywhere near the said visits of Sharon or Prime Minister Blair. Therefore, that is a difference between the two countries.

Now, specific Canadian policies do get a lot of U.S. attention. The decriminalization of marijuana gets a lot of attention; gay same sex marriages get a lot of attention. We do those kinds of things. They make the kind of news. But in the formal kinds of interaction, and political, and commercial interactions, they get much less. Mind you, some of our corporations do succeed in attracting headlines in the United States when the Nortel had to go through a revisit of its financial statements for the second time, which may be in the United States, because Nortel has a lot of U.S. investors.

But the issues that energize or upset Canadians, software, Canada-Blaine, Canada Syndrome, you know, did all of the terrible events of September 11th, did those terrorists come from Canada. When the August blackout of last year occurred, you have the Mayor of New York on television shortly thereafter declared that it was Canada’s fault. Mind you, we responded when the Defense Minister decided a U.S. nuclear reactor was behind all of this. But we do have those things, and issues like the beef embargo.

And those kinds of things energize Canadians much more. And that simply reflects the difference between the two countries, to some extent. I think that the United States is so important to Canada and everything we do, we worry about how it affects the relationship. Whereas, the United States has so many global issues to deal with that we’re just one of many different things on the American list.

But we also have a problem in Canada that we sometimes become a bit paranoid. And I recall when President Bush, George W. Bush, came to office, it was a great worry that maybe he’d like Mexico more than Canada. And so we had this great turmoil in our own media that maybe we were going to take second place to Mexico, failing to recognize that the nature of the relationships are quite different for both countries.

And that I remember that the people worried was Prime Minister Chrétien chemically aligned with George W. Bush and Mr. Rove and Dick Cheney, and was that the problem. President Fox was invited to the ranch and Prime Minister Chrétien did not go to the ranch, what did that mean. There was a heck of a lot of discussion of that.

And then when President Bush told President Fox from Mexico that the United States had no better friend than Mexico, to parts of our media this was interpreted to mean something quite different, that Mexico was more important to the United States than Canada. And this had its own cascading effect.

When the awful events of September 11th occurred, there was a readiness by some people in the Canadian media to believe that somehow Canada was to blame, and a rush to headlines for any rumor that would suggest that any of the terrorists somehow had a Canadian connection.

When Canada decided not to invade Iraq, there were all kinds of commentaries suggesting that we really didn’t have a choice, and that because we hadn’t joined the United States for whatever reason with respect to Iraq, that there would be a price to pay, and that we would be punished.

Now, it was interesting last year at this session that the pollsters who had studied some of these issues, and especially Iraq, found that most Americans had no idea whether we had supported them in Iraq or not, and it didn’t seem to be a big issue, but it was a big issue for Canadians.

Now, we are told that Canada has to be part of the ballistic missile defense, that if we do not join in whether we think it is a good idea or a bad idea, we will have less influence in the United States. Therefore, we have to do it. In fact, we have to do it even if we think it is a bad idea.

So I just make those points to illustrate that there are differences between the two countries, and that because of the significance to Canada for the United States and the U.S. relationship, that there is almost an obsession in Canada with the nature of that relationship. Whereas, in the United States, for most Americans, it would seem to be a relationship that is working and so why do you have to pay that much attention to it. Therefore, that is part of the problem.

This is all by way of background. It is not meant to mean that there is no room for better and better-informed coverage of both countries. In fact, I think on both sides we could do a better job.

There are two last points. I think the media have to phrase their messages carefully. And this is for you, Henry, this reminds me of the story in France a number of years ago when the government of France became very concerned that people were drinking too much, and so they had all these posters printed which said if you drink too much, you will slowly die.

And it was a complete failure because the people said, well, that are all right, we are not in a hurry. And I promised you two jokes. The second one is not only making sure your message is phrased properly, but making sure you understand your audience.

And I think many of you have probably heard the story of the captain of the ship which was sinking, and he had many different nationalities on board. And for each nationality, he had to persuade them that the women and children should go first in the lifeboats.
And so for the British he said women and children first, that is the honorable thing to do. And to the American men he said women and children first, this is your chance to be a hero. And to the Japanese men he said women and children first, that is the consensus. And to the German men he said women and children first, that is the order. And to the French men he said women and children first, the Americans are against it.

Now, I think I’ve probably taken too much time, but I’d just like to introduce our two speakers who are both highly respected journalists in their respective countries, Jim Strang and Giles Gherson.

I have known Giles for many years, and leaving aside my joke, in fact, The Globe and Mail is a fine newspaper, and it just has to get a circulation as great as ours, but they’re working on it. Giles has had quite a remarkable career in two nation’s capitals, in Ottawa and Washington, running a newspaper in Ottawa, and then in Edmonton, and now in a senior management position in Toronto at The Globe and Mail. He has finally made it to the center of Canada.

I’d like to invite Jim Strang first, who is an Associate Editor of the Cleveland Plain Dealer, which I think some people in this room read on a regular basis, and then we’ll hear from Giles Gherson.

And Jim has a long career and a distinguished career at his paper. And he currently is on the Editorial Board. And, therefore, has to spend a lot of his time telling people in the Cleveland area what to think and how to vote. But one of his areas of interest, and which he follows for his paper, is Canada-U.S. relations.

And so I’d like to invite Jim to give us an American perspective on the kind of job the media is doing, and why it is doing it the way it does. Jim.