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THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

Jim Strang*  
U.S. Speaker

Thank you very much. Good evening, Dr. King, and Counsel General, and honored guests. Let me be among the last and least to welcome you to Cleveland.

Here on the south shore of Lake Erie, we have some things in common with our neighbors on the north shore. Here, too, we have six months of winter, and six months when the ice fishing is not quite so good. This weekend, fortunately, appears to be the start of our warmer cycle, and I am glad you could be here to share it with us.

Actually, though, we are quite used to having distinguished Canadian guests here. From October through May, we receive frequent visits from one of your prairie province notables. Her name is Alberta, Alberta Clipper. She blows into town, dare I say, a bit too frequently for our comfort.

Which brings me in a breezy way to a metaphor that I believe introduces the topic of our session this evening, the "Role of the Media and Public Perceptions of the U.S.-Canada Relationship."

As are perhaps many of you in this room, I am a devoted watcher of the Weather Channel, that Atlanta-based creature of cable television, which in a few minutes tells us probably more than we really need to know about snow, rain, wind and sunshine anywhere in this country.

However, the careful watcher will notice something, well, unnatural about its illustrated forecasts. No matter how yellow or red the massive thunderstorms predicted to sweep up through the Midwest, no matter the whiteness of the snow piling high in Buffalo and Cleveland, these projections of what is to come mystically cease at the northern border as though they had run into a wall.

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It is as though, as far as the Weather Channel is concerned, Canada will have no weather. Oh, periodically through any evening, American viewers will see the temperature projections – in Fahrenheit – for Montreal, Ottawa, Vancouver, Yellow Knife and other Canadian cities. The ski resorts, too, will receive occasional mention in season of depth and conditions, but these figures are relatively static. They do not reflect the immediacy of constantly changing conditions. They are not what most of us would call news.

Be it for good or ill this is very much the approach that a preponderance of America’s news media takes to the ebb and flow of events in the country with which we share more than 5,000 miles of border.¹

The American mass news media for the most part are content to focus their shrinking news columns and precious minutes of airtime on pressing issues of proximate domestic intrigue and international turmoil, while remaining what I would term “rationally ignorant” of the events and occurrences in Canada that Canadians rightly take with great seriousness.

Rational ignorance, as some of you may know, is an economic concept. It is the idea that the cost of becoming knowledgeable about something outweighs the benefits of being knowledgeable about it. Therefore, it makes sense not to invest the effort to learn, especially when others with cause to make that investment are perfectly willing to share that knowledge upon request. It is a condition manifest throughout society, but especially reflected in questions of politics. Most people pursuing workaday lives with many divergent personal interests simply find it not worth their time to attain the expertise in public affairs that they perceive as not directly affecting them. It is then the basis for the value the news media provide.

We specialize in parsing the arcane so that for the investment of 50 cents or a few minutes of attention, those who wish to know may be adequately, if not abundantly, informed. Even as individuals maintain a rational ignorance, so do most news organizations, and that is why, by and large, there is so little news of Canadian affairs in the mainstream American press.

Many Americans do not care to invest the time to understand the people they so mistakenly feel to be just like us. Many editors, again mistakenly, tend to think that events in the nation with which the United States does more than 1.2 billion dollars a day in trade are not worth the space to report.²

Now, you will notice that I have couched my generalizations about the news media in qualifiers, “most of,” “by and large,” “many,” and “for the most part.” That is because, as you all know, there are some exceptions.

The Wall Street Journal reports regularly and well on Canadian business.\textsuperscript{3} The New York Times periodically assesses Canadian politics in depth.\textsuperscript{4} Moreover, the Associated Press offers a steady, if not mighty, flow of Canadian news. Thus, those who cared to know could find in the paper for which I work, as well as many others of its size and scope, fairly detailed and timely accounts, analyses and commentary on events that in its editors’ pressured judgments, our readers will want to know. Among them in recent months, the transition of Prime Ministerial control from Jean Chrétien to Paul Martin, and its portent for Canadian-American relations;\textsuperscript{5} the continuing investigation by Canadian authorities of the Mad Cow outbreak;\textsuperscript{6} the Canadian Supreme Court’s upholding of laws against marijuana possession.\textsuperscript{7} That is still a big deal down here. The WTO finding that U.S. duties on Canadian soft wood lumber are illegal.\textsuperscript{8}

We have, we being the Plain Dealer, in addition have produced our own staff stories on issues that touch our own readers and Canadians, as well. In Cleveland, a shrinking steel industry has smashed the hopes and plans of thousands of employees and retirees.\textsuperscript{9} Our business reporter, Tom Gerdel, earlier this year, wrote in depth of similar travails of Stelco, the Hamilton-based steel giant, its move to bankruptcy protection, and Canada’s efforts to restructure this industry.\textsuperscript{10}

As well, Reporter Susan Jaffe has written at length of the growing relationships between Canadian pharmaceutical companies and the region’s senior citizens driven by spiraling costs here to buy their prescriptions across the river in Windsor.\textsuperscript{11} To carry on the Weather Channel example, these and other topics are the occasional temperature takings, the high points of our neighbor’s affairs.

\textsuperscript{6} Chris McGann, Traffic Down at Border Crossing Mad Cow Disease Latest Concern About Travel to Canada, SEATTLE POST INTELLIGENCER, May 27, 2003, at B1.
\textsuperscript{9} Alison Grant, World’s Press Descends on Cleveland Jobless Story, PLAIN DEALER (Clev.), Aug. 4, 2004, at C1.
\textsuperscript{10} Thomas Gerdel, Steel industry’s ills taking toll in Canada, PLAIN DEALER (Clev.), Feb. 19, 2004, at C1.
\textsuperscript{11} Susan Jaffee, Don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy applies to drugs from Canada, PLAIN DEALER (Clev.), Jan. 31, 2004, at B2.
As you are all aware, these stories scarcely scratch the surface of Canada's vast political and cultural landscape. Among the stories we have yet to cover, and most likely will not, is the run-up to the Canadian elections as Prime Minister Martin weighs the political ramifications and seeks the opportune moment to make the call. Nor have we plumbed the stark national security concerns in a nation that like ours found itself ill-prepared for the threats posed by terrorists living among us.

These and dozens of stories like them, if they appear at all, are relegated to the briefs columns, not because they are unimportant, and not because we take Canada for granted. In the post 9/11 world, nothing can be taken for granted. It is rather because in the battle for space and time these stories cannot offset our own coming presidential election, our own struggle to secure our borders, and to ensure our safety. I know that must sound like an old song to many of you here. Yes, Canada is important, but the U.S. is important. That sounds as cold as Dawson in January, but from the standpoint of regional newspapers and broadcast journalism, where proximity remains a cardinal measure of news value, it is a fact of our existence. At least it has been for most of our lives.

In the past decade, a new world of information accessing has formed in that void. It is to ignorance what the light bulb was to night, what the jet plane was to Shank's mare. It is the new media stargate, the passageway to another universe of knowledge. Its portals sit in almost all of our office desks and most of our parlors. Some of you have one in your jacket pocket here tonight. It is, of course, the internet, the technological marvel of my lifetime.

With a few key strokes, Americans unsatisfied with what their domestic news sources tell them about Canada, can find themselves at the Canadian Embassy's media page, a good starting point, with its single click links to a dozen major Canadian newspapers, a dozen national magazines, and radio, television and other news links.\(^\text{12}\)

In addition, of course, it works the other way, too. Canadians are free to sample the thousands of news, cultural, organizational and political websites that explain more fully than ever could a newspaper or broadcast, the untold details of Americans' complexities.

As a newspaper man who has seen his craft go from manual typewriters and linotypes to desktop publishing, I am persuaded that we do not yet begin to comprehend the impact on communications that personal computers linked to the internet, and whatever follows the internet, will have in bringing down the barriers of time and space that have separated peoples and nations.

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The glass of the traditional media through which we have viewed darkly the cultures of our neighbors will be burnished by the uncountable fingers of those who want to know more about the people on the other side. The stereotypes that for so long have marred our images of each other gradually will be replaced by more accurate assessments of our methods and our motives.

We will come to see, finally, that the economic storms that darken Cleveland's skies bring torrents to London and Hamilton, as well; that the illumination of the human spirit brightens Sudbury as it does Cincinnati. As those perceptions are gained through new media and old together, Canada and the United States will find dimensions yet unseen in an old mutual and growing friendship.

Thank you.