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THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

Giles Gherson†
Canadian Speaker

Thank you, David. Just when I thought we were going to avoid cultural chauvinism, but certainly, Toronto is a great place to live.

I wanted to start by examining what I will call “Henry’s Proposition.” And, of course, the Henry I am referring to is none other than our illustrious Chairman, Henry King. Even he might be surprised to find out that he had framed a proposition on, of all things, the media, public perception and bilateral relations. But, in fact when he invited me to speak here, and told me what he thought I ought to be speaking about.

Being a good journalist, I jotted it all down, and now I am going to embellish it a little bit for effect. Now, Henry’s proposition is that the Canadian and the U.S. media increasingly do an inadequate and simplistic job of reporting on and interpreting each country’s national affairs, and that major events in each country are reduced to little more than headlines across the border.

Consequently, U.S. and Canadian publics are woefully ill informed about each other. That mutual ignorance or lack of broad-based knowledge is corrosive, and it weakens the underpinnings of a strong, mutually profitable trade and investment relationship. That is Henry’s proposition.

In a nutshell, poor media coverage begets a frayed trade relationship, which as Martha Stewart might say, is a bad thing.

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Now, he did not mention it, but maybe Henry’s point is illustrated by the fact that when George Bush was campaigning for the Presidency in 2000, he famously, or at least in Canada infamously, did not know the name of the then Canadian Prime Minister, launching a strained, if not entirely, unfriendly or unproductive relationship between the two leaders.

Anyway, my job here this evening, is to answer Henry’s proposition: is the media guilty as charged? If it is, does it matter?

Just so you know where I am going, my answer is to affirm that Henry is largely right, as both Jim and David have just said about the relatively dismal quality and quantity of media cross border reporting. Although, I hasten to add, and this does sound a bit chauvinistic, that the shortcoming is far worse on the U.S. side than the Canadian, a point that I will expand on.

I am not certain about the second part of Henry’s proposition; namely, that poor or skimpy coverage is harmful or has much of a negative bearing on the overall Canada-U.S. relationship. In fact, maybe there is a lesson lurking in the lyrics of the “Blame Canada” song from the South Park cartoon show that I know you are all familiar with and recite every day, at least on the U.S. side!

“It seems everything’s gone wrong since Canada came along, blame Canada. With all their hockey hubaloo, blame Canada.” Now, there follow more scatological lyrics that I will spare you this evening. Perhaps the lesson from the “Blame Canada” lyrics is that we Canadians do not need the publicity.

Let me circle back and deal more fully with Henry’s proposition. Henry asserts that Canadian media coverage of the U.S. and vice versa is far too simplistic. Now, this sort of complaint, about the thinness of both countries media coverage is nothing new at all. To press the point, here are some numbers. Despite the overwhelming importance of the U.S. to Canada, Canadian print and electronic media organizations have about twenty full-time correspondents stationed in the U.S. About 75 percent of those are in Washington, with a smattering in New York and Los Angeles. My newspaper, The Globe and Mail, for example, has three correspondents in Washington, two in New York, one covering business, the other arts, and currently a vacant slot in L.A.

By contrast, despite the fact that Canada is still the U.S.’s largest trading partner, a fellow G-8 nation, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, the American news organizations maintain precisely one full-time correspondent in Canada, and that is the New York Times’ Clifford Krauss, which is an improvement from

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a few years ago, when the Times had James Brook cover Canada from Denver, just over the mountains.\(^3\) You know, on a good day, you can see forever.

Now, in fairness, the Times Business Day Section also was a Canadian business writer, Bernard Simon, on freelance contract.\(^4\) In addition, the Dow Jones Business Wire Service, obviously, has an extensive network of about a dozen Canadian reporters in Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, Calgary and Vancouver, who also provide stories to the Wall Street Journal.\(^5\)

However, on the numbers, the Canadian media covers the U.S., I think, much more closely than the other way around. That is not to say that Canadian news organizations cover the American scene spectacularly well or with penetrating insight. But the top news stories of the day, including the bigger U.S. political, business, cultural and dramatic news stories that matter to Canadians are reported and analyzed by Canadian correspondents.

As well, it is important to emphasize that Canadian media supplement their own correspondents’ reports with large, large amounts of wire copy from U.S. media organizations, New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post Service, Night Ridder Service, A.P., Dow Jones, Bloomberg, and so forth.

In the CanWest metro dailies, which are the largest English language newspapers in Canada’s largest cities outside Toronto, the World pages every day, the Saturday Observer pages, the Sunday Review supplements, let alone the arts and sports sections, are full of American wire stories and features describing and analyzing U.S. events and personalities.

As well, Canadians are avid direct consumers of U.S. media from Time, Newsweek, and other news magazines, Vanity Fair, New Yorker, all of which have wide circulation in Canada, Business Week, Fortune, Forbes, Sports Illustrated, and on and on.

Online, the New York Times has over 800,000 registered Canadian subscribers, which nearly double the circulation of Canada’s largest daily newspaper, David’s newspaper, the Toronto Star.\(^6\) The Wall Street Journal also has a large Canadian readership, both online and hard copy formats.

Then there is television. Canadians have always tuned in to ABC, NBC and CBS. In fact, for Canadians, that was television before the advent of CBCTV. However, the emergence of CNN, CNBC, and a host of other spe-

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\(^6\) David Bruser, *John Honderich 'Simply the Best'; Star Publisher Bows Out After Long Career 600 Well-Wishers Celebrate His Accomplishments*, TORONTO STAR, April 23, 2004, at A03.
cialty cable channels in the last decade, and the spawning of the 500-channel universe, has clearly increased the U.S. media penetration in Canada.

To underscore the point, less than a month ago, CanWest Global Television cancelled the country’s only home-grown late night show, the Mike Bullard Show, because the ratings were less than a third of the 250,000 nightly viewers captured by the John Stewart Daily Show, which was airing at the same time on CTV. At the same time, hundreds of thousands of Canadian viewers tune in nightly to Leno, Letterman, Conan O’Brien, and on the weekends, Saturday Night Live. We all know that is where people get their news from these days, anyway.

Indisputably, all this adds up to a copious daily Canadian intake of U.S. news and information in one form or another. The upshot is that north of the border, readers, listeners and viewers learn a fair bit about U.S. events and developments across a wide spectrum of news categories from politics to sports, from crime to entertainment. In sum, I think Canadians know Americans rather well, maybe never better.

Now, certainly, the same cannot be said for Americans’ grasp of Canadian affairs. As I have suggested, the U.S. media has almost no full-time reporters in Canada interpreting Canadian events for Americans. Certainly, the television media has none. Canadian news service stories are not as widely used by U.S. news organizations, as they are used the other way around to supplement that meager diet.

Indeed, with the exception of U.S. sports writers up covering NHL games in Canada, the NBA’s Raptors, or the Blue Jays or Expos baseball, the American public gets almost no routine coverage of Canada from Canada.

The point was eloquently made by the fact that the Toronto media event of the winter, Conan O’Brien’s relocation of his popular NBC show from New York to Canada’s entertainment and commercial capital for four days in February, needed $1 million of federal and provincial subsidies for that to take place. That is how we get U.S. coverage.

Now, it is true that the biggest Canadian stories do get coverage. For example, last summer SARS outbreak in Toronto, the single case of Mad Cow in Alberta, Quebec separatism when it periodically reaches the boiling point, the occasional particularly gruesome crime, and more recently, so-

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7 Brad Oswald, Pulling Plug on Bullarda (sic) Blow for Canadian Showbiz, WINNIPEG FREE PRESS, Mar. 17, 2004, at D1.
11 William Orme, After Seven Years, Quebec Has Lost Its Separatist Itch, LA TIMES, May 12, 2002, at 3.
cially liberal Canadian policies that are countered by the more conservative U.S. orthodoxy such as gay marriage or decriminalization of marijuana.

For example, when The Economist's "Cool Canada" cover story appeared last fall and attracted quite a lot of attention, the Washington Post actually was three months ahead with its observation on July 1, that stereotypically, unobtrusive, boring Canadians have "slyly redefined their entire nation as Berkeley North." The story by staff writer David Montgomery did not do a bad job of alerting readers that Canada's cultural distinctions with the U.S. are quite pronounced, and maybe getting stronger, producing different policies on the Iraq War, as well as proposed gay marriage legislation and decriminalization of marijuana.

However, feature reports attempting to explain Canada to U.S. audiences are relatively infrequent. As one U.S.-based Canadian diplomat remarked the other day, "the problem with U.S. reporting on Canada is that it tends to caricature the "Nanook of the Arctic", which underscore how quaint the place is.

However, I think it is worth pointing out if Canadians are feeling some sort of slight from the U.S., they should not. It is my observation and I think Jim made this point also, that Canadian stories are not necessarily that compelling when they are competing for other stories for the space in newspapers and on the TV news lineup, especially for editors who are concentrated in the U.S. media centers of New York, Washington, L.A., and Chicago.

It is true that U.S. media organizations have far more correspondents in Mexico than in Canada, but then smaller U.S. states like Wyoming, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Idaho, Nebraska, Oregon, Alabama, Oklahoma, probably fare little better than Canada in the race for national media attention; and medium size states do not do that much better.

I should make one important qualification to my bleak assessment about the limited exposure of Americans to Canadian news information. It is that unquestionably, the U.S. government and corporate decision-makers with interests in Canada do gain access to Canadian media mostly online or through news clipping services. They do have a pretty sophisticated finger on the pulse of their northern neighbor.

Returning to Henry's proposition and asking the question, "whether it matters very much whether in fact we have a limited amount of knowledge in the U.S. about Canada, and perhaps more in Canada about the United States?" I think the answer is, as I stated earlier: No, not much.

It is interesting that given the huge amount of information that is available in Canada about the United States, and never more so, that when you look at polling lately, it shows that Canadians have become fairly wary of the United States in the last year or so. Even as Canadians have appeared to become more nationalistic at the same time they have become more attached to the Free Trade Agreement; and, in fact, want to see some improvement in the Free Trade Agreement, which is a big change in attitude from a decade ago when free trade encountered enormous suspicion.

Ekos Research, a polling company based in Ottawa, has done a fairly extensive set of surveys on Canadian-U.S. public opinion. What it found in October 2003 was that 77 percent of Americans view Canadians and Canada favorably, but only 46 percent of Canadians said they returned the feelings. Moreover, 63 percent of Americans view Canada as “similar” to the U.S., but only 44 percent of Canadians agree, with a slight plurality outright disagreeing. A majority of Canadians think Canada has become more American in the last ten years, but 90 percent say they would like to halt further Americanization.

A majority of Americans agree that Canada is united, prosperous modern, safe and just, which is very polite. Yet only 33 percent of Canadians view the U.S. as safe, only 37 percent see it as just, under 50 percent say it is modern, as opposed to traditional. I think that this is a response to a perception of growing cultural conservatism in the United States. Still, at least 70 percent do agree that the U.S. is prosperous.

Notwithstanding the Bush Administration’s displeasure over Canada’s decision to stay out of the U.S. led war in Iraq, 63 percent of Americans rate the Canada-U.S. relationship as good, while only 37 percent of Canadians agreed. In fact, 72 percent of Canadians believe the Iraq War worsened their country’s relationship with the U.S. Most Americans, as it was pointed out, did not notice. They were focused on the French and the Germans.

Ironically, and maybe for Canadians this is the good news, part of flying well below the U.S. media radar, a sizable 59 percent of Americans thought Canada supported the U.S. in Iraq, or remained neutral, with only 28 percent aware that Canada opposed the U.S. position. Further, 43 percent of Americans who said they knew Canada opposed the Iraq War agreed with the Canadian position. The upshot of that, even among Americans who opposed Canada’s position on the Iraq War, two-thirds say it will not affect their plans to travel to Canada or buy Canadian products.

Therefore, essentially what I wanted to say was that I think Henry’s proposition is in part right, that the media does not do a great job of reporting

across the border, but it does not really seem to affect perceptions all that much unless too much knowledge is a dangerous thing, or familiarity breeds contempt, which might be the view on the Canadian side. And on the other U.S. side, ignorance is bliss.

Thank you very much.