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Article abstract

In the last decade, Canadian anthropologists have evidenced new interest in the public promotion of their field and the broader dissemination of their research findings. The present paper is intended as a contribution to this vital issue. It reviews recent efforts to increase anthropology's profile. It assesses the interaction of one anthropologist with the media. It hopes to encourage the media participation of anthropologists, and to suggest some of the strategies at their disposal.

Promoting Anthropology: Idle Thoughts from a Talking Head

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In the last decade, Canadian anthropologists have evidenced new interest in the public promotion of their field and the broader dissemination of their research findings. The present paper is intended as a contribution to this vital issue. It reviews recent efforts to increase anthropology's profile. It assesses the interaction of one anthropologist with the media. It hopes to encourage the media participation of anthropologists, and to suggest some of the strategies at their disposal.

Les dix dernières années ont vu renaître chez les anthropologues canadiens un désir de faire connaître leur profession et de partager leurs découvertes avec le monde. Dans le présent article, l'auteur se propose d'apporter sa propre contribution à cette cause, en rapportant les plus récents efforts ayant pour but de promouvoir l'anthropologie. L'auteur examine plus particulièrement la relation entre un anthropologue et les media et encourage une participation plus active entre eux. Il présente finalement quelques stratégies permettant aux anthropologues d'arriver à une meilleure collaboration avec les media.

I have now completed some 35 interviews with journalists from the print and film media, and one or two conclusions are beginning to force themselves upon me. It is the purpose of the paper to share these conclusions with my colleagues in the field I have presumed to represent. If we are indeed persuaded that anthropology should achieve a higher public profile, it behooves us to make our media relations something more than an untutored exercise in amateur dramatics. This paper is designed to suggest some of the issues that confront an anthropologist who wishes to communicate with a larger public, and to outline one or two of the strategies at his or her disposal.

The first question at issue here is, of course, whether indeed anthropology should engage in a "promotional" exercise at all. Some, no doubt, will argue that such an exercise is beneath our professional dignity. Others will say that the dangers of misrepresentation are too much to risk. I have even heard it argued that there are so many dangerously eccentric anthropologists we can only harm the profession by encouraging its members to give voice to their research and opinions. The case against "media relations" takes several forms.

The other side of this debate has also spoken vividly. It is noted that if anthropology believes that

its research conclusions stand for something of value in social discourse and the education of those outside the classroom, it is obliged to seek a more public voice. To do relevant work and *not* to give it broad public dissemination, this argument claims, is to violate a public responsibility. These are the arguments from principle.

From a more self-interested perspective, it has been argued that promotion is necessary if anthropologists wish to increase the number of students in their courses, majors, and graduate programs. Promotion also helps to persuade would-be employers of the interest and abilities of anthropology graduates. Furthermore, it is observed, public funding depends upon a high profile. The fields that neglect or eschew the cultivation of a public image risk the further diminishment of already scarce resources.

I rehearse these issues not to resolve them, but merely to establish a context for debate. Plainly, I favor the latter argument. But I am not indifferent to the case against the public dissemination of anthropology. There are very considerable risks and costs attached to the dissemination of findings and the creation of a higher profile. I have glimpsed some of these risks in my own media efforts. I have probably also demonstrated one or two of them.

There is no question that the participation of anthropology in media relations is a "trade-off" in which benefits must be weighed against costs. Those who reckon this equation differently and conclude that we should not participate have a compelling case to make. I urge them to speak up in some public forum so that the field may debate this issue with the full range of options before it.

A Caveat

As a point of clarification, it must be noted from the outset that this entire exercise is guilty of academic trespass. To talk about promotion and dissemination of anthropology in Canada is to engage in an exercise outside of our area of academic expertise. It is to tread on the patch of another discipline, that of marketing. Anthropologists have often been guilty of academic trespass. Some of us have even made careers of it. But we understand how objectionable it can be. All of us have observed what becomes of the finer points and the important issues of our own discipline when it falls into the hands of "illegal" aliens.

A fully academic approach to public promotion would demand a much larger and more systematic study than is offered here. Marketing anthropology would demand a careful reckoning of the educational, political, and scholarly constituencies of the field, who they are and what they expect of us. It would demand a reckoning of what our field can, and cannot, offer these constituencies. Finally, it would demand a reckoning of the promotional strategies that would best communicate anthropology's strengths, to the constituencies it cares most to reach, in a form these constituencies would find most compelling, through media with which they are most in contact, at a cost that anthropology can best afford.

Virtually none of this is undertaken in the present paper. The present account, measured against the marketing standard, is truncated and unsystematic. My defense is simple. I am not a marketer and I am not qualified to undertake a marketing study. What the present paper offers is an interim solution, the inadequacies of which are justified, I think, by the urgency of the problem it addresses.

What I do want to examine here is a small corner of one piece of the marketing problem, the issue of promotion. I want to describe some of the ways in which I, as one anthropologist, have tried to play a part here. There is nothing theoretical or abstract about this account. Its object is to give practical advice. What I offer here is not quite a "how-to" but I hope it will provide a practical guide for those now engaged in or contemplating media activities, and a keener sense of problems and possibilities before them. I hope it will also help to engender debate on whether, and how, anthropology should create a more conspicuous profile.

The First Approach

My interest in this issue began in 1981. As a newly minted Ph.D., I was just discovering that all the worried talk in the 1970's about a job shortage in anthropology had more foundation than even the most pessimistic of us had guessed. Even our grimmest scenarios, invented as anxious graduate students over endless cups of coffee, now seemed preposterously hopeful. I had gone to Ottawa to plead for work from the civil service and to attend the "Learneds" being held that year at the University of Ottawa.

At the Learneds I had occasion to hear John Trent, then Executive Director of the Social Sciences Federation Council, give a paper entitled "Elements of a Global Strategy for the Development of Public Awareness of the Social Sciences and the Dissemination of Social Science Research" in the "Urgent Problems" session of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association. Trent spoke forcefully and well. I came away persuaded of the value of public awareness. More particularly, I came away eyes

gleaming at the prospect of work. Here, perhaps, was a way to make myself useful.

With Trent's address as my prompt, I spent the remainder of my time in Ottawa making myself an enthusiastic irritant to the civil service. I wrangled invitations to see Dr. Trent himself, Paul Buckley of the Science Council, and Norman Dahl and Ian McKellar of the S.S.H.R.C. All of them were generous with their time, extraordinarily helpful in their suggestions, and enthusiastic about the part a young Ph.D. might play in the area of public awareness and promotion. However, one by one, they painted an unhappy picture of the present state of promotion in the social sciences in general and anthropology in particular. All noted the social sciences were doing less promotion than any other part of the university. All pointed out that, as they were then constituted, Canadian universities systematically discouraged the promotional efforts by their faculty. Scholars were disdained and penalized by their peers for communicating with the public. Most universities were still unprepared to reward promotional activity.

Finally, they noted the academic world and the media were deeply at odds. Academics had little or no understanding of the media and its objectives. They were suspicious that their contributions would be distorted and that their media efforts would rebound to the discredit of their disciplines, their departments, their universities, and themselves. From the academic point of view, the media had little understanding of the objectives and the fears of the academic world. In sum, the academic and the journalistic worlds were at a stand off. Neither appeared to understand how academic ideas could be given successful, widespread public dissemination in a manner that preserved their integrity.

In the summer that followed I continued my pursuit of this topic. I went to Toronto to talk to Paul Salvador, Elizabeth Lowry, Mel Freedman, and Michelle Maurice of TVO (Television Ontario). This visit gave me a better sense of the vast amounts of time and money needed to mount television productions of even modest quality. As academics we can hardly begin to comprehend the scale of this time and money: projects spend 2 years in the planning stages, anything more elaborate than talking heads cost (in 1981 dollars) around $60,000. For those of us whose academic endeavour has the proportions of cottage industry, these figures make the head spin. But the visit also told me that if anthropology could muster this money, it had at its disposal quite extraordinarily talented and enthusiastic people on whom to draw.

I also went to see James Murray then an executive producer of the Nature of Things for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Murray stressed the creation of personal relationships between individual academics and individual media representatives. This, he argued, was the surest path to mutual comprehension and a satisfactory working relationship between academics and journalists. He also argued that academics should attend to the media in their day-to-day lives and think about what they see there. They should begin learning the objectives of these institutions by studying what they do.

I saw a number of other people in Toronto, including a science journalist who gave me a first hand glimpse of how difficult academic-media interaction is from the media side. She reported having been treated with great rudeness by several scientists. She also suggested that the interface between the academic and journalistic worlds should be left to special-category journalists; making it very plain that she did not welcome the participation of academics in the world of journalism except as knowledge producers.

In the fall of 1981, I was, for my enthusiasm and nothing else, appointed to the external communications committee of the Social Science Federation of Canada. This committee concerned itself with all of the problems noted in the first part of this paper. We were especially concerned with how the "tenure and promotion" process in Canadian universities could be made more responsive to the value of public awareness work.

Our second concern was how to consider the best options for the dissemination for research results. I was sent to Montreal to investigate current practices in the field. The committee was especially interested to learn about the work of Hebdo Science who have exercised great ingenuity in making scientific research available to the media. One of their devices was a dedicated 24 hour phone line that carried taped news stories. Radio stations were to able to phone this line and tape the stories they found of interest.

The committee's conclusions were, finally, disappointing ones. It was clear that, without substantial funds, the social sciences and anthropology had no ready way to disseminate its research results. Plainly, we were part-time, amateur players in what is a very large and competitive business. We were competing for space on extraordinarily crowded and expensive media. And we were competing in a very well organized market.[1] Our standards of production would have to be limited and unsophisticated in a world where both the media and their

audiences have very sophisticated expectations. Our options looked limited and unpromising. As it turned out, it appeared that the best we could hope for were five-second clips on radio, and brief handouts for the print media.

I despaired. Plainly this was a recipe for unhappiness. I did not relish the prospect of forcing five years of someone's research into a five second tape or 300 words. Just as plainly there was nothing here that could sustain a full-time career. The best I could hope for was to pursue my own career as an academic and to seize opportunities for media activity that presented themselves there. In sum, I resolved to make my media efforts an individual initiative.[2]

An Interim Solution

I have undertaken this private effort for five years now. In that period, I have done some 35 radio, television, and print interviews. I have written my own essays for print media. This experience had brought me into contact with a range of media outlets. I have done print interviews with journalists for the Saturday Night Magazine, the Globe and Mail, the Wall Street Journal, Working Woman, Canadian Press, the Toronto Star, and several local papers. I have done radio interviews with C.K.O., C.K.C.O., C.B.C. "Radio Noon" and "Ideas" and "Basic Black," with radio stations and wire services in British Columbia, Tennessee, California, and Florida. I have published short articles in Newsday, Working Woman, and Saavy. I am not certain that I have learned anything especially illuminating in all of this. But all of it is nevertheless hard won knowledge, earned by trial, error, and embarrassment. As transparent as it seems to me now, none of it was clear to me five years ago. I pass it along to my colleagues in the field on the grounds that a little knowledge can sometimes be a useful thing.[3]

Some General Observations

The most general observation I wish to make here is that journalism is, if I may use this very hackneyed metaphor, another culture. Journalists are not, as some academics like to think, opportunistic, predatorial creatures who happily and thoughtlessly transform information into entertainment. Plainly, they do not have the same standards and objectives as the academic world. But this is not to say that they do not have standards and objectives every bit as demanding. Anthropologists who rail against the media for "distorting" their work are implicitly accusing them of failing to hold to academic, anthropological standards of logic and rhetoric. This is, of course, simple ethnocentrism.

The second observation to be made is that the anthropologist who contributes to the media must observe the first rule of rhetoric: know your audience. More particularly, they must understand that they are not talking to other anthropologists or academics. They are not talking to people in the state of hyper-alertness with which we normally attend to academic discourse. As one magazine editor put it to me after reading my first ponderous draft of an article.

Listen, our reader usually reads our magazine when she comes home after 8 or 10 hours of work. She is beat. She usually reads it over dinner or in the bath, so we do not always have her undistracted attention. And she usually has something to do at 8:00, so she is in a hurry. Your prose has to get through exhaustion, distraction and impatience.

We must suspend the kind of vigilance that we adopt when writing for our colleagues. We must adopt another kind of vigilance, one that will allow us to reach a different audience with a different set of needs and expectations.

Let me see if I can identify some of the properties of journalistic discourse that are most germane to the would-be anthropological contributor. There are, I think, at least three of these properties. Journalistic discourse must be manifest, relevant, and provocative.[4]

Journalistic discourse, as I understand it, must be "manifest." The meaning of the discourse must sit on the surface of the discourse. It must be able to enter without resistance directly into the listener or reader. This is not to say only that it must be clear. All academic discourse should be this. Journalistic discourse must also be transparent. The listener or reader must be able to look right through the medium to the message.

This means sentences must be short. They should avoid clauses. They should use language that conforms to everyday usage as much as possible. This means not only that it should be jargon free. Meaning should be placed in the care of the term or the phrase most often trusted with this burden in normal speech. The consequences of the "manifest" property for academics are dramatic. It means that our characteristic reticence is often unwelcome. The rhetorical armory of hesitation, uncertainty, caution, and balance does not scan well and it should be set aside.

Remember when you talk to the media you are not talking to your colleagues, you are talking to a very different public. They do not wish to hear an endless list of caveats and qualifications. Inevitably, you will be asked a question that suggests several

answers and raises a host of issues. But remember your audience. Choose the answer with which you can most live and assert it calmly and with assurance. Given the choice between complexity and clarity, you must choose clarity.

Journalistic discourse must also be relevant. It must bear on everyday experience just as surely and precisely as academic discourse must bear on scholarship. Keep in mind that your audience has no necessary academic interest in the topic at hand. They do not wish to make it the object of formal study. But they do have another "evaluative context," the life they lead day to day. If it does not adhere to something in that context they will give it the same scant regard we academics give work that does not adhere to our own.

This means that virtually all academic work given public presentation must undergo a process of translation. This is most painful for academics. We have agonized over research, we have sharpened our definitions, we have sorted out our distinctions, we have worried our work into a state of perfect clarity. Now just at the moment we can give it public dissemination, a journalist seems interested only on focusing an unimportant detail. But it must be remembered that the journalist knows the "evaluative context" of his or her audience. He or she is undertaking a process of translation without which your academic work cannot enter the popular public domain. There is no point getting on your high horse. There is no point in playing the artist imperiled by the philistine. Know your audience.[5]

Journalistic discourse must also be provocative. It should be attention-getting. It should be counter-expectational. It is, after all, competing for the attention of a listener or reader who is often tired, distracted and in a hurry. It is competing with other information sources who routinely use a playful, even shocking strategies (e.g., "Aliens ate my Buick"). The droning recitation of lifeless facts captures no one.

This means that academic must expect to be asked difficult questions. They must be prepared to stretch their expertise to address controversial, or daring subjects. This, too, is inevitable. One television interviewer who noticed my difficulty in fielding some of his questions, said to me during a commercial break, "We like to punch it up a bit." The only solution in this situation is to smile ruefully and say "well, that's a little beyond my expertise but perhaps..." or "well, the jury is still out on that but..." Go ahead, try something, embrace controversy. As academics we are trained to court ambivalence. But nothing makes worse copy than expert dithering.

A final point on discourse, this one to do with style. Michael Silverstein argues that the most talented ethnographic and linguistic observers of another culture's system of communication are often highly sophisticated practitioners of their own. It is probably also true that the most successful interviewees are individuals who enjoy better than average abilities in everyday conversation. There are some simple rules of thumb here, but they are no substitute for "natural" ease and grace in conversation. When talking to an interviewer it is necessary to speak clearly, simply, vividly, and with pace. All of these are transparent but the last. By "pace" I mean that peculiar ability some speakers have of using emphasis and cadence to instruct the listener on what to think about what is being said. The voice is used to tell the listener when a point is being completed, when a new one is starting, where the key word is, and so on. Pace gives the listener what we might call "listening instructions." Naturally gifted conversationalists (and radio and television hosts) use it quite automatically in an interview. The rest of us will have to cultivate it.

These are some of the characteristics of discourse that the anthropologist must be prepared to satisfy if he or she wishes to contribute to the media. There are many more, and I hope that anthropologists with media experience will bring them to our attention. The point I want to make most strongly is that these characteristics depart dramatically from the conventions of academic discourse. We must expect to find our media work difficult and sometimes painful. We must expect to develop our new skills in this area slowly. When it comes to media work we need re-education and this will come slowly.

What Anthropology Can Do

The individual participation of anthropologists in the world of journalism is, as I suggested above, only a short-term solution. It is necessary for the field someday to make more concerted and collective efforts.

One of the things we must press for is recognition. We must stop sneering at those who do media work. We must understand that their academic and their media work are separate undertakings, and that the latter cannot be used to judge or discredit the former. We must also encourage our tenure and promotion committees to be more generous on this issue. Plainly, media work cannot be made the substitute for scholarly activity, but just as plainly it is an important contribution to the life of the discipline. It should be rewarded as we reward confer-

ence presentations or committee work We must also begin to list our media work on our curriculum vitae.[6]

Another of the things we might do is to encourage more border crossings between anthropology and journalism. Let us find the money to enable a journalist to spend a year wandering from department to department in the world of Canadian anthropology. This intensity of contact can lead to the first hand acquaintance that we want the media to have with our work. It would also create the personal relationships between journalist and academic that are so important to media work. Who knows, if the Gods are very kind, another Robert Fulford might emerge.

Reverse passage is also possible. Let us see if we can find a way to allow an anthropologist to spend a year working at a newspaper, magazine, or television station. (Goodness knows, we are badly in need of ethnographies of these institutions in any case.) This individual could not only help disseminate information about anthropology, he or she could also discover what it is we need to know to make ourselves more welcome participants in the media. Perhaps there is somewhere among us another David Suzuki.

Conclusion

Until the field has mobilized itself in a more collective way, individual anthropologists can make their field better known to a broader public. The advantages of such an effort are considerable, the costs of neglecting it enormous. To undertake this task successfully, we must be prepared to see that the media is another culture, with standards and objectives different from our own. We must also honour the first rule of rhetoric, and understand our audiences. The discourse of journalism is not the discourse of the academic world. To insist on applying academic standards to journalists and our colleagues who interact with them is nothing less than ethnocentric.

Anthropologists have been accused of deliberately turning away from their own culture. They have been accused of being world-renouncing. Perhaps this is why we have been reluctant to give our work wider dissemination, and so slow to learn the rhetoric conventions necessary to do so. I think the time has come to change this pattern of behaviour. If principle does not persuade of us, self-interest surely must.

NOTES

1. It is true, for instance, that it is difficult to get certain academic stories into the Toronto Globe and Mail because this newspaper already subscribes to the New York Times wire service. The stories from this source come pre-packaged, as it were, and pre-paid. To buy a story from a more local source is less simple and an additional cost.

2. I consulted the Social Science Federation of Canada in May of 1988 to see what efforts in dissemination were currently underway. Marcel Lauzière informed me that the radio clips had been discontinued and that a magazine has been halted while still in the planning stages. Apart from its "letter from the president," the S.S.F.C. is not now engaged in research dissemination activity, and it has formed a task force to consider new initiatives.

3. The following account does not distinguish between the several forms of media. It is worth observing that there are relatively fast media (e.g., television and most radio) and slow media (e.g., newspapers and magazines). The following rules must be observed most stringently with the fast media, and less so with the slow.

4. I do not think this is an exhaustive list. As anthropologists become better at interacting with the media it will grow.

5. Some academics have tried to get around the problem of misrepresentation by demanding the right to see and approve material before it goes to press/air. In my experience, this is not a realistic demand. Few journalists have time enough to satisfy it. Academics must get used to being misquoted and misrepresented.

6. I have done this for several years now and I have provoked several explicit questions and a few unspoken ones. People wonder whether they are perhaps talking to someone who secretly wishes to disqualify himself from serious consideration as an academic.