

Nash laments decline of ethics in journalism

CBC newsman Knowlton Nash was instrumental in revolutionizing news coverage with the prime-time Journal-National combination. Nash spoke recently to a crowded Senate Chamber at York Excalibur's Greg Gaudet cornered Nash after the lecture.

By GREG GAUDET

Q. How do you see your future at the CBC? Do you think you'll make a movement to the United States like Robert McNeil?

A. No. No. I was in the United States. I spent nearly 20 years in Washington and I came back here. No, I see myself staying here in one form or another in the business of journalism. I find it professionally and personally satisfying. No, I don't have any intention at all.

Q. You discussed the role the press plays in reflecting society. Mike Duffy at a seminar a couple of years ago talked about Joe Clark and how, before he went on his around-the-world junket which was an absolute failure, the atmosphere created by the journalists who followed him was of a joking nature.

A. Yes, there are atmospherics like that which can affect things. They really shouldn't affect coverage because you have to divorce yourself from that. The atmospherics of a campaign plane are very different from the reportage that's done, and so it should be.

It's men and women together who share a lot in common—drink and joke and laugh together, but that's different. You have to separate that out from your professional coverage of an event or a person.

On the Joe Clark trip, it certainly wasn't the reporters who lost their luggage, it was the organization that lost it. That kind of thing, when it happened, you worry that it may have gotten more play than it deserved and that's not the responsibility of the reporters there but of the people at home. That's why you have a desk back at your base: to weigh the importance of a story they are reporting on; whether you put it on the front page; whether you put it at the top of the newscast or don't use it at all.

Q. What did you think of the reporter who quoted Brian Mulroney, during the election, when he thought his remarks describing Bryce Mackasey as "an old whore" were off the record?

A. Well, in that kind of a thing, I would—I was saying to somebody earlier that I have reservations about it.

These days, almost everything off the record is in fact on the record, and that's a pity, because I think there are some circumstances where you get a better appreciation of an official by being able to talk to him freely and having him talk to you freely. You get a sense of what he's like, rather than the image he wants to present.

In that particular case, I think the quote was—if I were there, I wouldn't have used the quote. I wouldn't have used it.

Somebody was talking earlier about the quote of Jesse Jackson. I would have used that quote even though he used it in private because it was dealing with a very substantive issue that was highly important.

I think you could take Mulroney's attitude, that he expressed in that conversation, and, if you wanted to use it, to say that, while he's attacking the patronage issue privately, he isn't all that upset by it, because he knows it's the kind of thing that makes political life go on, without using his specific quote.

I think you have to be very careful and I feel uneasy about the fact that there is not the private discussions anymore. I think there have to be private conversations and relationships to simply get to know the person better that way.

Q. Otherwise you wouldn't have developed your relationships with Kennedy and been able to tell anecdotes about him and Lyndon Johnson.

A. Well, that's true. Mind you, this is something fairly new. It's only in the last five or so years that everything off the record has become on the record. Before that, it was very strong that you didn't know or report very much about Kennedy and all his girlfriends. You didn't report very much about Johnson or his peccadillos. Roosevelt's paralysis you hardly saw. No one took pictures of him climbing into a wheelchair. But it's changed, and I'm not sure it's totally changed for the good.



NETWORK NEWZ

Q. I have a question about the development of the 24-hour news networks like CNN. Does it threaten the news on the commercial networks?

A. I don't think the 24-hour newscast and CNN threaten in any way. What I think they've done is in fact stimulated the regular networks to do better journalism. And I think they also provide a very good adjunct in the sense that they have total freedom to go live to an event which the commercial networks won't have because of their commercial commitments. I think it's added in a very positive way to the whole theatre of journalism.

Q. During the Liberal leadership campaign you were interviewed by Barbara Frum. A day or two later someone wrote a critical analysis saying you shouldn't have been interviewed, offering your opinion. It was the media being interviewed by the media.

A. What I was offering was not opinion. It was reflecting on what I was being told on the floor (of the convention) and that was perfectly legitimate. I was free to roam and was therefore able to pick up a lot of private conversations with people and pick up things that I could regurgitate—not precisely what was said—but I could approach it in such a way that I could communicate the ideas.

Q. You talked about reducing the "star" element in journalism. There have been two articles written about you in the past week alone.

A. That can be a problem. In television terms it means you can't do certain kinds of stories. When I'm covering a political campaign, or something like that, I really like to be an anonymous note-taker and sit in the back. You can observe what people are doing and saying and you're kind of a fly on the wall. You

can't do that if you're a Mike Duffy or a David Halton or myself or someone of that kind anymore. Therefore you lose. You can't cover the same kinds of stories.

In the last election—I didn't do it for this recent one, but for the previous one—to hear what people were saying I went around door-to-door. In Toronto I went around with John Roberts, and in Halifax I went door-to-door with a Conservative. In both cases the other parties bitterly complained, and there were stories about "you're supporting this guy," simply because you're being a reporter.

I was with Mulroney when he was in Toronto and there was a picture taken of Mulroney talking to me and it was printed in the *Star*; the implication being that I was supporting him when I was just trying to do a job. So it becomes very difficult to do your job and that's why the "star" image can be damaging in the sense that you aren't able to do as much as you could before. Most of us want to be journalists instead of "stars."

Q. You said the CBC is the "spinal column" of the country and that it holds people together. Do you think it's starting to influence what people are thinking about? Is it setting an agenda?

A. I hope it's setting an agenda. The whole idea is to make people think more about the principle issues of the day.

Q. Do you think it's right for the CBC to decide? Out of a hundred stories they might choose ten.

A. You have to do that. There's no choice. You're limited. You can't write 40,000 words for this piece you're doing now because they're going to tell you we can only use 1,000 or 500. I think that's all right. Nobody will read your 40,000 words while people might read your 500.

So you have to make choices. And you make choices based on experience and your evaluation of what the public interest is. You make choices very professionally and responsibly. And that's all you can do. I think it's a very good thing, in fact, that CBC has had the program—the *National* from 10 to 11. I think it's the most important thing that's happened to journalism in this country or any other country in a very, very long time.

Q. If it's been such a success, then why haven't the other major networks done the same?

A. Well, most of them didn't think it would be a success. Most people were very worried about it. Why others haven't copied it? Well, in a sense, Global went to 90 minutes stimulated, I think, by the interest they saw. They saw the public was interested in news so they went with it.

We've put on a morning show which I'm sure is stimulated by the interest that was demonstrated in *The National* and *The Journal*. The McNeil-Lehrer hour was patterned very much on *The National* and *The Journal*, no doubt about that. In Australia, they're now doing a show on ABC they're going to call *The National*. It's an hour of that same kind of thing patterned on *The National* and *The Journal* experience. So it's had a big influence not only in this country, but elsewhere in the world.

Q. Do you think this is an improvement in the CBC over the last few years? Would you have left the CBC 10 years ago like other people have done?

A. I think it's a tremendous improvement. We've been fighting for this for an awful long time. I was looking at something the other day; a lengthy memorandum; about 40 pages—that I wrote in 1969, which was arguing for a prime-time strip. An hour a night of journalism. So it's an argument that some of us have been making for 15 years, and we thought it would work. It is working.

More letters

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accomplished without properly supported faculty, staff, security, physical plant personnel, etc. Students will not come to a university threatened by repeated strikes and interference with the educational process. Let us not forget, the amount of money York receives is a function of the numbers of students attending York.

There has to be a better way. Perhaps above suggestions are not good enough. If not, take them as a challenge to do better. A university is the most appropriate place to bring imaginative, creativity to the collective bargaining process.

—Peter K. Kaiser

Good habits

Editor:

I feel that far too much is being made of the issues concerning the strikers and administration. Not nearly enough is being said regarding the students in all of this. Students cannot research papers, cannot find the means for getting financial aid or paying tuition fees, nor can they properly set routines which make for good study habits—therefore good grades. An uncertainty weighs heavily on us all.

—Kevan Parry



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