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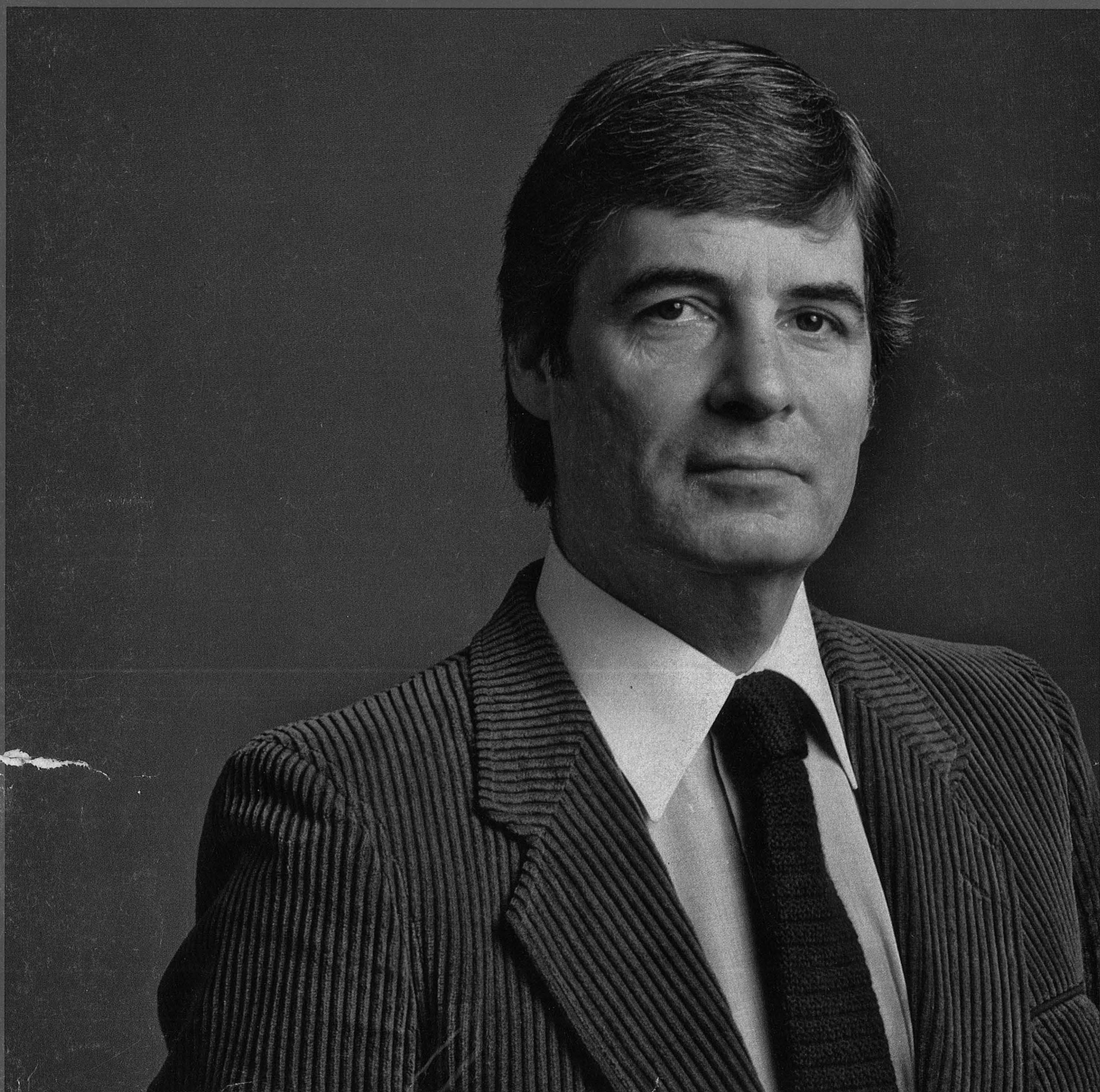
Broadcaster

**Feature Report:
Journalism**

**Industry critics agree,
TV is worst-reported
story**

**No formula yet
for Canadian
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**Peter Desbarats: the
Canadian dean of journalism
assesses his profession**



The journalistic career: a lonely pursuit for truth

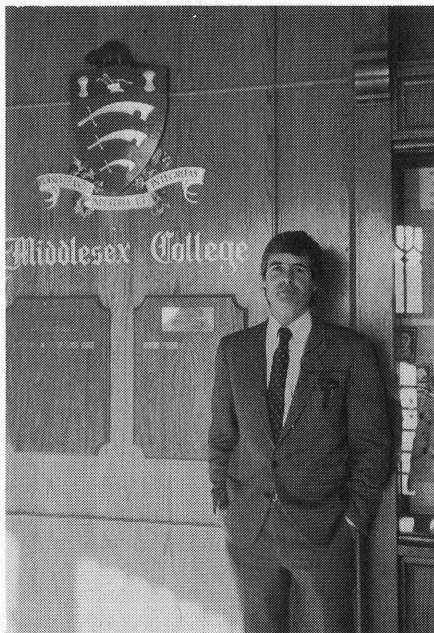
by Barbara Moes

When was the last time you read verse that was truly delightful? Read Peter Desbarats' *The Night the City Sang*. When was the last time you read impassioned prose about the Canadianess of Canadians with a plea in favor of bringing home the constitution? Read Peter Desbarats' *Canada Lost Canada Found*. When was the last time you saw a documentary that looks at your own industry with a critical eye? Persuade the CBC to let you view *Inside TV News* hosted by Peter Desbarats and aired in the dog days of August 1981. When did you last visit the University of Western Ontario campus? You may just do so in the near future because the new dean of journalism, Peter Desbarats, is planning some innovative programs for Canadian journalists.

Desbarats' dedication of his *Canada Lost Canada Found* book to, among others, Bill Cunningham, former vice-president of news and current affairs at the Global TV network "whose convictions about journalism over the years have been unwavering no matter how the corporate winds blow" is a significant tribute to a relationship that marked a turn in the road for Desbarats whose career also included TV news journalism. Following an anchorman stint with Global TV's Peter Trueman he wound up his on-camera work as Global's Ottawa bureau chief where for seven years he commented astutely on the political scene.

The 49-year old Desbarats evaluates his profession as he speaks freely from his "tenured" dean's chair about his experiences in front of the camera recalling the still "mystifying" termination of his contract with Global after his seven years' service there. He speculates that it was an internal fight over authority and money along with his alignment with Cunningham. "When he lost I lost with him." Desbarats claims that he may have been too expensive (he wouldn't reveal an exact figure but said he was earning somewhere between \$75,000 and \$100,000 at the time).

When Ray Heard stepped into Cunningham's spot (Desbarats and he had worked on the *Montreal Star* together) Desbarats felt that it would be interesting because "we didn't see eye to eye on things," but felt that a certain amount of diversity and tension inside a news organization would be a good thing. He doesn't think that



Peter Desbarats in his new academic home, Middlesex College, UWO campus

Heard felt the same way. He recently told Global president Paul Morton that while he was still "mad as hell" (they gave him the legal 30 days' notice) he now felt that it was the best thing that had ever happened to him because it gave him a chance to stop and look at his accomplishments over a 15-year period and it forced him to get out of a rut at 49 instead of at 55.

His term of unemployment after the Global release lasted only about three weeks at which time the Kent Commission decided to recruit him for its investigation into the newspaper business. Desbarats was well qualified because of his own print background (the *Montreal Gazette*, Reuters News Agency, Winnipeg Tribune, *Montreal Star*) and also because he inherited the feisty spirit of his great-grandfather who was a printer/publisher at the time of Confederation and launched a daily newspaper in New York, the most competitive market in the world. Two-thirds of the way through his one-year commitment to the Kent Commission where he prepared a report titled *Newspapers and Computers: An Industry in Transition*, the University of Western Ontario asked him to head up its innovative journalism department — with tenure.

Since his deanship in 1981, Desbarats has applied the greasepaint one more time to host a controversial TV documentary called *Inside TV News* produced by Mark Blandford (*Duplessis, Empire Inc.*) of CBC's Montreal English headquarters. This program became the centre of much controversy because those that make the news product were forced to go into a pseudo-analysis to determine how they were coping with a world (in three-minute clips) that is exploding with incomprehensible events. Provocative questions were raised by Desbarats (most of them unanswered) pertaining to accountability of journalists, the time constraint problem, which in turn led to a disturbing look at the near impossibility of getting a coherent report on Finance Minister McEachen's budget in a palatable form for the hungry news audience.

TV critics across the land unanimously complained of the non-existent publicity for the 90-minute documentary which was buried in the August schedule. Desbarats claims that the expensive orphan project was finally aired by the public affairs department headed by Bill Morgan who felt uneasy about the project from the beginning. The *Inside* program went through a series of screenings inside the CBC "like I've never seen before" remarks Desbarats. While Mark Starowicz was very protective of the *Journal* (the *Inside* crew wanted to film the historic opening night but were not given permission to do so) the CBC news department was very keen (there is a clip of Mike Duffy trying to sort out the infamous budget). CTV refused to participate at all while Global and CityTV were very co-operative as were the American network media barons who stipulated however that the program not be aired in the U.S. But Desbarats concedes that the CBC deserves credit for airing the program at all, because certainly nobody else would have done so.

Desbarats came away from that experience with some curious insights about the psyche of Canadian journalists who he claims tended to be more defensive than the Americans who willingly engaged in discussions about accountability, flaws in the medium, and the negative impact of deadline pressures. Desbarats posits that the U.S. by and large is a more democratic society because people feel they can change institutions there whereas ►

Canadians (with their colonial mentality) expect authority to come from above making certain practices a fait accompli. He cites a recent unique experience in Lethbridge, Alberta, when he shared the stage with the publisher of the Lethbridge Herald who was actually in front of an audience of irate readers explaining what he was trying to do with his paper. "To me that looked very unCanadian" says Desbarats but he thinks publishers and editors should be encouraged to appear on platforms more often.

But if we are to cure the ills of the profession the media dean believes that Canadian journalists will have to be more autonomous, especially in private television, in order to make demands on the system and to enact change. Desbarats points to the publicly-funded CBC which has, ironically, more editorial independence because "there is a deliberate fear of political interference which is consciously resisted." He cites an example. "When I worked on the *October Crisis* in Montreal (Desbarats' career encompasses a stint with the Montreal CBC where he, a native of that city, produced several political documentaries) we received an internal directive from the CBC that we weren't to comment editorially on what was going on at the time. We just threw it into the wastebasket and there were never any repercussions from that."

While none of his comments were ever changed at Global TV Desbarats was aware of some subtle managing that went on when he would hear that owners or directors of the station were unhappy with something he had said. "It was transmitted very effectively to me there while at CBC there was a conscious attempt to try to insulate you from that."

While *Inside TV News* looked at news as a consumer product Desbarats and others wondered why there hadn't been more consumer activism directed at the media. It's a very good target. He claims to have discovered one reason when he went to Lethbridge — it's very difficult to get publicity for this kind of issue. Desbarats thinks the journalists should align themselves with the consumer and he believes the journalists want the product to be as good as possible but adds, "it's the media that is defective, don't blame the journalist. He is not being given the necessary tools to do an adequate job."

What is wrong with journalism in this country? Desbarats draws out some congenital flaws and at the same time suggests some sensible solutions. An examination of how our 'seat of authority' is covered by the media raises all kinds of practical and ethical questions. Having covered Parliament Hill for seven years as Global's bureau chief and political commentator, Desbarats knows whereof he speaks. "Ottawa is still covered to some extent as if it was a kind of city council or a provincial government rather than a major government of a very important country. Yes, it's difficult to report adequately on a very modern complex government but you

can't just go into the question period, grab a few inflammatory clips and pretend that you're covering what goes on in Ottawa. And yet that's what most of the media do, particularly the television media.

The politicians have been telling us for some time now that Parliament is becoming less and less important and the real power in Ottawa is in some of the regulatory bodies which are almost never covered by the media. You can't recruit somebody 26 or 27 years old who has worked in a local radio newsroom for four or five years and plunk him up on the Hill and expect him to make any kind of sense. Ottawa is a place of great expertise and here is some person who is half their age earning one-third their salary with far less education and infinitesimal experience most of the time. The last election campaign that I covered in Ottawa was 1980; I was about 46 and one of the oldest journalists on the campaign trail."

teletext . . . will go a long way towards remedying the big flaw in television news

And what kind of therapy is needed? Desbarats suggests more specialization and more attempts to update what journalists know by introducing continuing education programs for them. To date one of the best support systems is the Centre of Investigative Journalism which the dean points out was started by the journalists themselves.

While working on the Royal Commission for newspapers Desbarats discovered that nobody had ever done a comprehensive study of labor relations in Canadian newspapers "when everybody knew that strikes were instrumental in closing papers sometimes." He chooses journalism schools as a natural site for research but the reality is that the industry does not support that kind of activity which naturally would require financing. "The industry has become accustomed to a very high rate of profit. Everybody keeps saying that the electronic media is an industry that is not exactly like other industry. And yet they act as if very little but profit is involved in it most of the time."

And what of the consumer? The success of CBC's *Journal* indicates that the viewer wants more high quality information but the hungry public should have a better understanding of the media, stresses Desbarats. "Lectures on media literacy at both the high school and university level will better educate our future business and professional people about the process." Desbarats feels that the public must understand the artificiality of the process in order to at least diminish to some extent the viewer's curious combi-

nation of gullibility and scepticism. Despite some naiveté, surveys indicate that television has a high credibility rating among viewers but at the same time it is regarded as a big institution that is very suspect, admits Desbarats.

One of journalism's chronic ironies, laments Desbarats, is the lack of accessible library and resource centres for journalists whose end product is information. "If they're making shoes, they have a library; if they're making news, they don't. The old tradition that the journalist works with a kind of a notebook and pencil is still with us and the media owners are quite happy to go along with that because it's very inexpensive."

Speaking of his own experience at Global TV he refers to Bill Cunningham as "an enlightened news director" but "even he was astonished when I asked him for a full-time researcher in Ottawa, which I got, and which at that time made us unique in that sense. CBC didn't have one (only a clipping clerk) and people don't believe that a news industry could possibly function like that." (A Global spokesman verifies that since Desbarats' departure there has been no full-time researcher in Ottawa.)

But as Desbarats sees it television news doesn't really do much more than point an arrow at an event in the hope that people will read more about it. He predicts that teletext, a selective medium, will allow the viewer to call up 10 or more frames on something like the national budget in order to get a more detailed account. In England there are at least 600,000 TV sets that receive teletext and it's the cheapest form of print on the screen. Desbarats believes this new technology will go a long way towards remedying the big flaw in television news. "I don't see how a distribution system as effective as that will not be used."

While he conceded that videotex and teletext won't completely do away with newspapers he cites its increasing popularity recalling how a communication expert from New York utilizes a portable terminal which he carries in his attaché case, plugs it into his TV set in the hotel, dials the computer in his office, reviews all his mail, and leaves messages. "He's not quite using it in a taxi yet" but as the prices of these things come down (this one cost just over \$100) their portability is going up. Its drawbacks are that you still can't get very many words on a page and it's still hard to read but that's going to change with high definition television screens.

Utilizing the new technology will of course produce journalists who are really information processors, says Desbarats, who now presides over the only university department that is actually employing and training journalists in this specialized area. He admits there is no artistry in it but it will be an important aspect of journalism in this decade.

Desbarats set up the Westex project at

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UWO whereby four journalists input agricultural material gathered from various sources, edit it on one of the standard newsroom type terminals and then send it to the Grassroots computer in Winnipeg where it is translated for use on a Telidon system. A 'letters to the editor' column is now being initiated and this will allow students to communicate with the consumers. Desbarats proudly claims that UWO has a "proprietary stranglehold to a certain extent on the whole field of new information technology so far as other journalism schools are concerned."

The new dean (he remarks on being the only member of the faculty without a degree, even his students have degrees) revealed his three-year plan which embraces Desbarats' philosophy of journalism. While the number one priority remains teaching he puts research next on the list (previously third on the list). Research activity, he asserts, will help to keep the school a leader in its area and will hopefully attract more funding to the school. A new core course will be implemented in the 1983-84 academic year which will allow for more in-depth journalism. A two-week seminar institution on economics and finance for working journalists will be set up (a law seminar was begun in 1977) and certain business corporations have already expressed an interest. In order to create more funds to equip the school with electronic type newsrooms Desbarats has formed an alumni committee which he hopes will help raise money for the school. Continuation of the program in journalism for native people (this year there are 16 students) is also planned. Desbarats has

also begun a campaign thrust to persuade the media industries in this country to support journalism education. "The school now functions as a recruiting and screening agency for the industry and yet we get nothing in return. I think it's insane that the Thomson organization provides money for journalism training in England and very little in this country. I think that journalism schools also have to get together and support one another."

Journalism schools on campus have been considered to be almost sort of semi-respectable academically (this despite the fact that all candidates at UWO must have graduated with an honors degree). While the school only takes in 40 applicants there were 130 applications this year. Students still believe there's a certain amount of romance attached to the profession but there is also the feeling that if you're any good you can make some kind of an impact. Journalism is still regarded as a very personal business.

And what about Desbarats' personal experiences? Well there is the interview with Prime Minister Trudeau (and he agrees that he is the most challenging person to interview and that the man really hasn't met his match yet) when after some debate with his cohort Peter Trueman they decided that Desbarats would ask Trudeau about his marriage. What happened was that Trudeau turned the tables on Desbarats and asked him how his marriage (which at the time was "awful") was faring. Trueman rescued Desbarats but as Desbarats says "Trudeau got something and I got nothing."

One of his most difficult moments on television was a Montreal interview with Melina Mercouri. After discussing Greek politics there were 15 minutes left to talk about anything and she suggested sex. "I practically died. We talked about Greek women and men and I remember when I came out of the studio I was dripping. She was the most intense person I had ever interviewed, she had a magnetic quality and when you were with her the world literally disappeared."

When asked if he found TV on-air work stressful Desbarats replied "the hardest job I ever had was writing three columns a week for the Toronto Star out of Ottawa. Intellectually that was by far the most demanding. Intellectually television is easy, particularly news. It relies on a gift to synthesize quickly. There's a lot of adrenalin flowing in the performing and the whole process resembles show business. I have never considered myself

a natural on camera, I'm too understated most of the time. But what you do is master the techniques of TV which are those employed in drama. An interview has form, a plot and you use stage techniques to bring out a dramatic moment in an interview. After a while it can become formulaic and an interviewer can get lazy."

Rewards? TV journalists are paid very well — in the area of \$100,000 a year for an anchorman and this just highlights the fact, says Desbarats, that TV news is a form of entertainment where the journalist is competing with professional entertainers. "This showbiz nature is the unhealthy part of TV news but that's the way the marketplace has devised it."

Alternatives? "If you want to practise 'serious' journalism you have to be content with a smaller circulation. There's an opposition quite often between editorial quality and profits. When I worked for the Montreal Star in the 60s they decided to improve the editorial content. It became so progressive that most of the readers reacted against it. It spent more money to lose more money and became a better paper in the process."

"Yes," he confesses, "journalism is a very lonely occupation which involves many personal hardships." It also can have a devastating effect on personal relationships (Desbarats is on his fourth marriage which he says finally seems right — Desbarats and his fourth wife share the responsibility for 11 children which have come from previous marriages) and Desbarats in a self-effacing way admits that creative people have massive egos and are difficult to live with.

Throughout the day Desbarats was scrupulous in shifting his observations from the print media to the electronic media but it became obvious that writing is probably his first love. He is now working on another children's book about a boy and his computer ("I consider myself basically a writer and I can't get too far away from that") soon to be published by McClelland and Stewart and he claims that it is this area of his work that has made the most impact on the public.

The sunlit, spacious campus of UWO seems to embrace the relaxed and inquiring figure of Desbarats whose khaki green trenchcoat with its stylish epaulettes, symbols of a past romantic career, lends a sense of needed diversity in a landscape where people and ideas can shape a land.

The task of bringing home the constitution, no matter how flawed or incomplete the effort may be, is one that I instinctively and passionately share. Is it only symbolic, as its critics say? Well I am starved for symbolism. I can remember how I felt when I first saw the flag in 1966 and when I heard the crowds in Montreal singing the anthem in 1980. I want more of that. I want that piece of parchment. Flag, anthem, and constitution.

Canada Lost Canada Found
Peter Desbarats