

FEATURES

Desbarats the academic journalist

by Marion Zych

After spending only a year and a half in university, Peter Desbarats quit classes to work as a copyboy for the *Montreal Gazette*. Sitting in his spacious office in Middlesex College, those days of "stop the presses" and copyboys are far behind him, as dean of Western's School of Journalism.

Desbarats turned to journalism because of his interest in creative writing, an interest he developed in grade school. Writing was something that Desbarats could do well, and that he enjoyed doing; it was also something at which he could earn a living.

Citing restlessness and boredom as reasons for leaving university, Desbarats does not regret what

Western's Dean of Journalism never worried about his career goals. "I knew I could get a job as a journalist whenever I wanted to."

he did, only because he considered his days at classes a waste of time. He adds matter-of-factly, "I knew I could get a job as a journalist whenever I wanted to."

Desbarats came to Western in August 1981, after spending a year assisting in writing and researching the Kent Commission reports. The commission was set up to look into the effects of newspaper ownership concentration on the public. He became involved with the commission primarily because he was unemployed; after an illustrious career with Global Television Network serving as Ottawa bureau chief from 1973-1980, Desbarats was suddenly asked to leave.

Reflecting on his time at Global, Desbarats describes it as the first time in his life he got caught in a power struggle at the top and an economic wave at the same time. Desbarats says the news director responsible for bringing him into Global in 1973 was caught in the struggle and lost. Shortly after that, Desbarats too, found he was without a job. He explains that in addition to being closely identified with the news director, he was a high-priced

The Kent Commission appealed to Desbarats because he needed a job after Global TV dismissed him in 1980.

item. At that point, Desbarats was among the top half-dozen journalists in Canada in terms of annual income and was replaced by someone at half his salary.

Although initially he was angry and saw no justification for his dismissal, except to save money, Desbarats says it was the best thing Global had done for him because it forced him to examine

where he was going. Looking back over the last few years, Desbarats says the network probably did him a big favor because it made him question whether he wanted to spend the rest of his working life in that "gilded cage."

Desbarats readily agrees it is much more difficult today for an individual to get a job in either radio or television than when he first started out. While learning to write a newspaper story was once accomplished through on-the-job training, university-educated reporters now fill the newsrooms.

Besides his work with Global Television and the *Montreal Gazette*, Desbarats spent one year in England reporting for Reuters news agency, and four years with the *Winnipeg Tribune*. During this latter stint, Desbarats also wrote political columns and hosted a CBC radio program. At the same time, he was an interviewer and script writer for a CBC-TV.

From 1960-1965, Desbarats was a political correspondent and features writer for the *Montreal Star*. He then moved on to host a nightly CBC-TV news and public affairs program until 1970, at which time he took up his post as Ottawa Editor for the *Toronto Star*. This was followed by the position at Global TV, where he covered all the major Ottawa and Quebec news stories, as well as federal political campaigns and the prime minister's foreign visits.

During the Kent Commission, Desbarats worked as senior consultant and assistant research director. He designed research programs and prepared

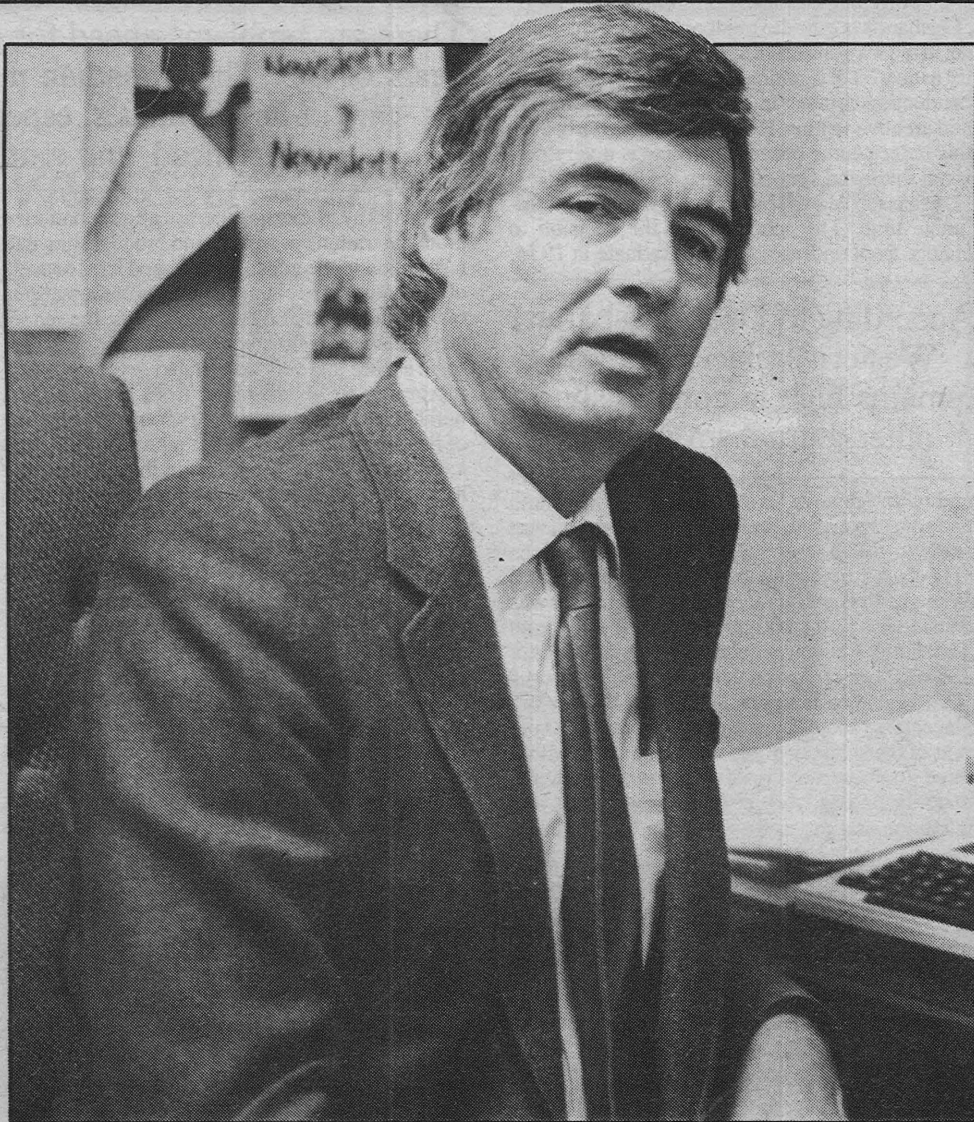
Desbarats admits it was much easier to get a job in the media when he started with the *Montreal Gazette* than it is today.

a special report on the impact of computers on newspapers. The commission concluded that the concentration of newspaper ownership in Canada was a serious problem as it created possibilities for control of the news. Although the commission proved quite controversial, the inquiry was a total failure in terms of generating legislation. Nonetheless, Desbarats thinks the negative publicity generated by the Kent Commission did not do much to harm journalism.

In his role as a political and public affairs commentator, Desbarats has written five books on the Canadian political scene. Among his most recent is *Canada Lost/Canada Found*. In 1976, he wrote *Rene—A Canadian in Search of a Country*, a best-selling biography of the former Quebec premier, Rene Levesque. Among his non-political books is *The Canadian News Illustrated*, which is essentially the history of Canada's first national news magazine and its publisher, his great-grandfather George Desbarats.

As dean of the School of Journalism, Desbarats says he has enjoyed discovering that he has some administrative abilities. Calling himself an "academic entrepreneur," he defines his role as that of a conciliator, ensuring faculty have enough to work with and students are satisfied. He also takes part in the teaching process, although he admits this

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Photos by Catherine Winder

Desbarats at centre of storm

by Graeme Hamilton
of The Gazette

In recent weeks Peter Desbarats has been the focus of a lot of local media attention—not as an author, and not as dean of the journalism school, but as a critic of London.

It all began a couple of weeks ago when he addressed the London Ad and Sales Club. For his speech he decided to bring together all his criticisms of London in a concentrated half-hour assault. It was met, he says, with a standing ovation from those in attendance.

Others, however, were not so appreciative, and in the past two weeks Londoners, from concerned citizen Welwyn Wilton Katz to deposed mayor Al Gleeson, have jumped to their city's defence.

In letters to the editor and opinion pieces in *The Free Press*, people have questioned both Desbarats' right to criticize and the validity of those criticisms. One letter-writer accused Desbarats of a "simple failing of his perspective," while another grouped him with "all these effete, pseudo-intellectual, non-productive academics." One *Free Press* columnist pitied him for being "one more bewildered

planners simply made no plans at all."

This "inhuman development," he says, "has jeopardized the survival of the centre of London not just as a place to do business but also as a place for people."

Other local institutions are also to blame, among them the local media. "The critical role is one of the basic roles of journalism, provided it's constructive," and in London this role is not being adequately fulfilled.

In the controversial speech, he "was doing to some extent what a journalist should be doing. I had observed the city for four years and I was giving my opinion."

The detachment of the university from the city is also a problem, and that problem is compounded by the cold shoulder given when the university does take an interest in the city. "University people stand a bit aloof from the community," he says. "They like to criticize it without becoming involved, and their involvement isn't welcomed by local businessmen."

Desbarats' forecast is not all doom and gloom, and he does offer suggestions to put the city back on track. "What remains of historic London has got to be saved," and he



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tourist to our town," and another suggested that "Londoners couldn't care less what Desbarats thinks."

For his part, Desbarats is happy with the reaction to his speech. The general public does not hear about the people who phone or write him or who approach him in the street. This personal reaction, he says, has been "generally favorable." He rates the response on the letters page as half-and-half, and considers this supportive, as people tend to write letters more to attack than to defend.

What, then, are Desbarats' beefs, and why did they stir a controversy?

His major complaint has to do with improper development in London, and the blame for this, he says, lies with city hall. They pursue "low-cost government" without incorporating positive ideas about London.

In the downtown area, "when the time came for big investment, with the Bell building, the provincial courts, and Eaton's—which is hideous on the outside—the city

stresses the importance of the city developing a "coherent cultural policy." He allows that changes might involve a loosening of the city's pursestrings, an investment of tax money in the city's development. "I'm not saying the city should be bankrupt, but it does have a very low tax rate."

He interprets the developments of the past two weeks as good signs for London. The surprise defeat of Mayor Gleeson the day after the Ad and Sales Club speech "indicates a fair amount of unhappiness about the way London has been drifting," Desbarats says.

In addition, he sees the response to his speech as an indication of sympathy with his views. "I hit a nerve," he says, and people are coming to the conclusion that quick action is necessary.

Not everyone has reached that conclusion, of course, and in some circles Desbarats' name remains a dirty word. But his criticism at least has forced Londoners to consider their city's future.

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is a "fairly limited part" of his duties.

Desbarats is quick to point out that teaching can get in the way of administrative duties, but he does try to do a bit of teaching each year. This year he is conducting courses in the history of journalism and creative writing. He says he particularly likes this latter course because "writing is a very personal thing and very revealing."

Desbarats believes he came to Western at a fortunate time. The school made the decision to change from undergraduate to graduate in 1974,

According to Dean Desbarats, Western's placement rate remains high in comparison to other journalism schools.

and by the time he arrived in 1981, "the school had gone through all the teething troubles and was ready to really accelerate."

He claims this can be seen in a number of ways. When he first arrived at Western, the school was considering about 100 applicants for 40 places. That number is now around 170 with increases of about 20 per cent each year.

Desbarats boasts similar statistics of the school's placement record. Over a 10-year period, 90 per cent of the school's graduates found work within three to four months of graduating, with the majority finding work at major newspapers and television stations across Canada. Desbarats is

proud of the school's placement rate, and in comparison to other journalism schools, Western remains quite high.

During the students' 12-month term at Western, Desbarats says the school tries to create

There are problems ahead for good journalists who are over 40 years of age. The Canadian media industry should take proper care of its journalists, especially as they get older, more experienced, and more financially demanding.

journalists by immersing them in a combination of practical training in writing and broadcasting and instruction in the ethics, history and legal aspects of journalism. He claims that "one of the virtues of the school is that it is small." Thus, the school "can provide the 40 students with very, very personal service and very accelerated development."

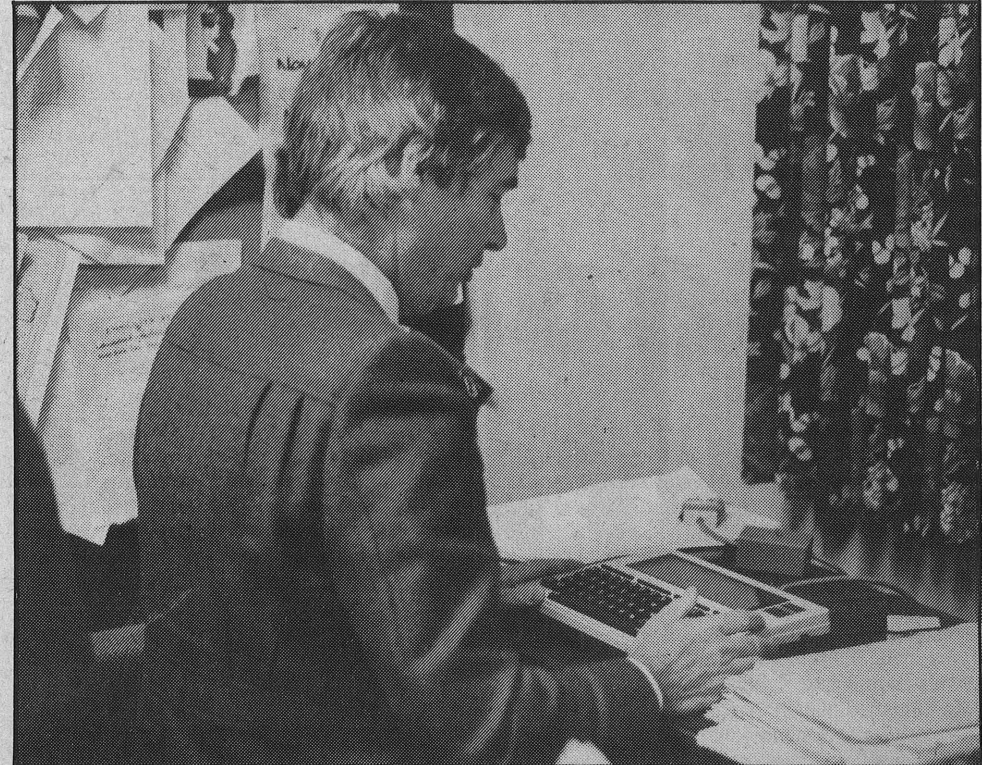
Referring to his dismissal from Global, Desbarats says there is something wrong with the state of private television. There is a problem for good journalists in their 40s or 50s in this country and he wonders whether their careers will continue to offer them the "personal and financial rewards that they should have or whether they will be slashed off as a cost-cutting measure." Desbarats says he believes the Canadian media industry is not "taking proper care of its talent, particularly as it gets older and more experienced and more demanding in terms of money."

Desbarats maintains that his job with the university serves as a nice base at this stage in his life. Not only has he enjoyed himself during the past four years, but his position has opened up a whole new career for him where he doesn't have to put journalism aside completely. Desbarats claims he

is very fortunate because, "there aren't too many people that get that opportunity in their late 40s." Nonetheless, he is reluctant to say whether he will be around for a second term, since he is "not thinking that far ahead." Desbarats explains this

Of all the forms of media he has worked on, Desbarats says he found "print the hardest" and "television the most enjoyable." While admitting that it's all journalism and merely a different way of expressing yourself, Desbarats says he has found over the years that he hasn't been able to make a choice because, "I really wanted to do everything."

Looking back on his career, Desbarats says his chosen profession has been a continuing education for him. "It's one of the professions where you simply learn all the time" because it "is composed of seeking out information and finding information." Desbarats says his education didn't stop when he left university, but in some ways it started.



PETER DESBARATS, dean of Western's School of Journalism, claims he is very fortunate to be in the place he is not. "There aren't too many people who get that opportunity in their late 40's."
Photos by Catherine Winder