

First House of Commons, now....

Courtroom dramas will be televised

by Daniele Boxall
of The Gazette



PETER DESBARATS: "It horrifies me that some people get all of their information from television news."

Photo by Daniele Boxall

It is inevitable that television cameras will be allowed in the courtroom, Peter Desbarats, Dean of the UWO School of Journalism, has said of the future of legal reporting.

"To me the camera is an eye for the public," he said. "There really is no reason in principle why we don't let the cameras in."

Desbarats, sponsored by the Bar-Faculty committee, spoke Wednesday to a group of about 30 people on the law and media issues.

The introduction of cameras improved the proceedings in the House of Commons, he said. "It was just a kindergarten. Cameras disciplined this."

The introduction of cameras would also open the courts to more public scrutiny. Currently, anyone, including artists and journalists, are allowed in the courtroom. "There is no reason to discriminate against one medium," he said.

There are more advantages than disadvantages to having cameras in the courtroom. Technology is now advanced enough so that it will not interrupt the proceedings, Desbarats explained.

Questioned on the fairness of this coverage because such a short segment of the whole proceeding is shown on the news, he said:

"I have never felt that I could provide a comprehensive report in 90 seconds." The clip is like a headline, an attention getter, he said.

Somebody who only watches television news is not informed: "It horrifies me that some people get all of their information from television news."

When asked about his views on videos and whether they should be censored, he replied that he does not like pornography and violence, but "basically I believe in the common sense of the individual."

Like prohibition, he continued, censorship will not work. "A journalist who takes any other position is contradicting himself."

Desbarats worked in both the electronic and print media before becoming dean and was also a consultant for the Kent Commission.

As a journalism teacher he has been called upon to be an expert witness because other journalists are hesitant. "The public view of the fearless journalist quickly disappears when they are asked to talk about their own profession.

"One of the issues (common to expert witnesses) is that they are paid incredible fees," he said. As a witness for John Monro against the **Toronto Sun**, he was faced with the problem of how much he should charge.

"I did not want to be charged with profiteering," said Desbarats. He charged \$400 for the day in court.

A **Sun** reporter fabricated information and the supervising editor never checked to make sure that it was true. "How this could have happened is still a mystery," he said.

The **Sun** later admitted that it was wrong and apologized. "It was impossible to find a journalist to say what the **Sun** publicly had already said," Desbarats recalled. He was asked as an expert witness to say that correct newsroom procedure had not been followed.