COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP AND MEDIA

ABSTRACT

Martin Murphy presents the Quebec Community Groups Network and explores the relationship between community leadership and media beyond the practical needs of communicating effectively through press releases, briefings, and interviews.

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The Medium and the Message: Official Language Minorities and Community Vitality and Media and Ethnic Diversity in Canada
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The Quebec Community Groups Network – the QCGN – was founded in 1995. We are the product of an effort to ensure community participation in the co-management of the Canada-Community Funding Agreement in Quebec of Canadian Heritage's Official Language Community Organizations and Institutions Program.

Since 1995, we have evolved into much more than co-managers of a single federal funding envelope. Five years ago, we began developing and implementing a comprehensive community development program. Two years ago, the QCGN began a strategic planning exercise that resulted in a new strategic direction and a detailed five-year strategic plan for English-speaking communities in Quebec. The strategic plan was adopted by our Board of Directors last May.

The QCGN is composed of community organizations, institutions and other community stakeholders. Our members are committed to work together to promote the vitality of the English-speaking communities of Quebec by responding to what they have identified as their priority needs and expectations. The specific objectives of the QCGN are:

- *To generate knowledge to build an evidence-base for community advocacy and action;*
- *To promote and support the community development initiatives of its members;*
- *To assess and influence government policies that affect the development of English-speaking communities in Quebec; and*
- *To enhance the organizational and professional competence and capacity of its member groups so that they can respond more effectively to their respective communities and client groups.*

These objectives have, in turn, been grouped into four functional areas: knowledge generation; community development; policy; organizational and professional development.

Reaching across all these functional areas and strategic objectives is a primary need for our organization to communicate well. We recognize that we will only succeed as leaders in our communities and in our larger society by communicating our vision, our reality, our needs and our solutions effectively in English and in French. One of the first priorities, in fact, has been to work with experts to develop a comprehensive communications plan for the next five years of the QCGN's development. Inevitably, communicating well in the modern world means that we have to work effectively with the media.

MARTIN MURPHY is President of the Quebec Community Groups Network.

Now it is true that we can develop highly effective internal communications channels and we can find creative ways to speak directly and widely to citizens through advertising or new media like the Internet. But we also know that effective media relations are a necessary part of our work, especially in a province and in a city that are blessed with very rich media scenes in both Official Languages.

So, at the QCGN we intend to work cooperatively and professionally with journalists as a necessary part of being effective leaders of our community.

Today, I want to explore for a few minutes the relationship between community leadership and the media beyond the practical needs of communicating effectively through press releases, briefings, and interviews.

Jack Jedwab, the chief organizer of this event, has demonstrated in some of his recent polling and analysis that English-speaking Quebecers look to the media, more than anywhere else, for leadership on social, cultural and even political issues.

Meeting this expectation of leadership must be an interesting challenge for a newspaper's managers and editors. In 1996, for example, *The Gazette's* new owners seemed to take up the leadership challenge by promoting a much tougher line on Canadian unity following our country's near death experience in the 1995 Referendum. One of the owners (not Conrad Black) was quoted as saying, "the *Montreal Gazette* will stand up for the minorities who have been victimized by separatist governments."

This came after several years of growing criticism of the community's leadership in the paper, especially by certain high profile columnists who brought a "take no prisoners" approach to community leadership.

Inevitably, the challenge of trying to lead our community becomes as obvious to newspaper owners, managers and columnists as it does to the rest of us. Over time, an appeal to "angryphones" just didn't connect with enough of the readership base to be sustainable, especially with Francophone and so-called allophone readers.

To the extent the paper saw itself as providing leadership, it was quickly confronted with the question: Who, after all, are we trying to lead?

That's an especially difficult question here in Montreal, the most bilingual city in the world and also one its most multi-cultural. And *The Gazette* literally cannot afford to get its audience and their "leadership expectations" wrong. In the fluid mix of languages, cultures, and relationships that characterize being an English-speaker in Montreal, it's incredibly easy to get it wrong.

And how do you speak clearly, in a single voice if you will, for a community that is as large and as diverse – ethnically, institutionally, geographically – as English-speaking Quebec?

I believe that *The Gazette* is doing a good job making sense of our complex community on a daily basis. To the extent that there are issues that we feel deserve more coverage, we recognize that we have not always done a good enough job to alert reporters and editors to them. I will let *The Gazette* speak for itself on whether it feels it has done enough on its side to cover key community issues.

In a discussion on leadership and the role of media, I also must recognize how important other media outlets are for communities across the province. *The Quebec Chronicle Telegraph*, for example, does remarkable work keeping its community in Quebec City informed on issues that matter to them. Similarly, *The Record* in Sherbrooke and the other publications in the QCNA. In electronic media, CBC Radio's Quebec Community Network is an information lifeline for many communities outside of Montreal and CBC Television, CFCF and Global Quebec play crucial roles.

And I cannot leave the subject of local media without mentioning a number of community newsletters and WebPages in areas of the province which provide excellent coverage of local interest as well. They represent an enormous investment of volunteer energy in the essential work of knitting communities together with information.

If I have any advice for the media today, it would simply be that journalists continue to focus on the generosity and energy of the volunteers in our community who are the backbone of all our efforts and accomplishments. I hope that this focus leads them to question how well our governments are meeting their responsibilities to support

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our communities and encourage their vitality. Journalists, by their nature, are always looking for the scoop and always alert for controversy. But they also want to tell stories about issues and people that matter to their readers. And there are lots of good stories to tell in English-speaking Quebec.

My conclusion is that leadership in our communities is a shared responsibility with media owners and producers. Usually it is a collaborative relationship. Occasionally it will be conflictual. But it is an inevitable relationship because effective leadership by groups like the QCGN demands good communication. Working with media to advance the interests of our communities is something we have to do well.

Which suggests that I should be getting back on message, as my communications plan requires me to do.

So, let me conclude by saying that our aim at the QCGN is to work with the media and other key partners to be recognized as an authority on the English-speaking communities of Quebec and the policy issues affecting them.

Our intention is to expand the value-added services that we offer to our members so that they have the skills and expertise required to better serve their communities.

We are putting in place all the volunteer leadership, the staff and the programming that we need to deliver on our new strategic direction which will be fully operational in 2007.