HOW MAGAZINES CAN SERVE TO LINK CANADIANS AND HELP THEM TO COMMUNICATE

ABSTRACT

Jim Gourlay, who used to work as a senior political writer, is now the editor of two large magazines serving the Atlantic communities. He has chosen to leave the high-rolling, glamorous world of political journalism for the more fulfilling yet equally valuable world of magazine editing. While he and his colleagues are often accused of engaging in "lightweight and frivolous" reporting, he assures us that his brand of "feel-good journalism" is the perfect antidote to the horror stories reported in newscasts and newspapers.

While we publish two consumer magazines and a host of other publications, I wish to speak here specifically about *Saltscapes* magazine, for I think that title represents a good example of a Canadian publication that seeks to accomplish precisely that.

I tell people that *Saltscapes* is just a great big mirror that we hold up to our audience and say "look how wonderful you are." We market ourselves as a feel-good magazine; we publish nothing negative. There is no shortage of other media out there ready to do that.

We are the antidote for the television news and the latest horror story from the Middle East.

But we've taken some public flack from Journalism students, and competitors, as being journalistically lightweight and frivolous. We would argue otherwise – and our growth and success would suggest we are striking the right chord with our audience, that the mature audience we serve intuitively 'gets it' – and those folks immediately understand and appreciate what we're doing.

That journalism students don't 'get it' is of no consequence. I was also philosophically and passionately naïve in my 20s – and I was resolved to use my pen to defeat governments and rid the world of corruption and so forth. But I learned an important lesson in humility in my early 30s that caused me to begin to reflect upon the relevance of conventional mainstream journalism. At that time I was a member of the elite within the news department – the senior political writers whose byline topped the front page stories, above the fold, day after day about what this politician or that said or did. I rubbed shoulders with Premiers and Cabinet ministers and Prime Ministers and royalty and other foreign dignitaries. I reported from Ottawa, and London and Frankfurt and Boston and the United Nations in New York and so forth.

As senior political writers, we strutted through the newsroom secure in the knowledge that we were the cream and that our colleagues who looked after the local news, and the obituaries and the crossword and the weather forecast, and the horoscope and the letters to the Editor and the classifieds were lesser mortals.

Until one day, I came into possession of a reader survey report which revealed that people preferred to read – the local news, and the obituaries and the crossword and the weather forecast, and the horoscope and the letters to the Editor and the classifieds – over the front page and what some damn politician had said the day before that would be forgotten the day after.

I began to try to work with issues that actually touched people in their every day lives. I turned my back on the coveted Ottawa correspondent position, considered the top job in the newsroom, and the big house that came with it. I became frustrated with the superficiality of newspapers, and 20 years ago I migrated to magazines.

In order to tell you about *Saltscapes* magazine, I need to first tell you a little bit about Atlantic Canada. This is a region of mainly rural communities. The most urban of the four, Nova Scotia, still has a rural population of more than 70%. The value system is based upon tradition, upon family, and upon neighborliness. For example, homes regularly change hands at the closing of real estate transactions without any actual transfer of keys: for there are no keys, never have been, or somebody lost them so long ago nobody can remember.

Driving through those communities, people, even teenagers, wave and smile instinctively at strangers as they go by. The vegetable stands in the Annapolis Valley of Nova Scotia are automated –

JIM GOURLAY

Jim Gourlay is the Publisher of Atlantic Canada's two largest paid-circulation magazines Saltscapes (a lifestyle magazine) and Eastern Woods & Waters (an outdoor magazine). Saltscapes has quickly become the largest and most popular magazine in the Atlantic region and continues to grow.

Nova Scotia style. A little hand-written sign says: "take what you need and leave the money." There's a hand-written price list and a coin box to make change. Nobody steals it.

The Editor's letter in the inaugural issue of *Saltscape* magazine read, in part:

"Saltscapes… is about who we are… and what we have… Not about what we have not…"

And that, in essence, sums up what we do.

So what does Atlantic Canada HAVE NOT? The region HAS NOT a very impressive Gross Domestic Product index. (GDP). So Atlantic Canada is habitually denounced as a "HAVE NOT" region. But what does that mean, what does GDP measure? Does it measure quality of life, or personal happiness? Are conventional economists capable of measuring those things – or do they only serve the corporate sector? Does a higher level of economic activity automatically translate to a higher quality of life; or to personal happiness?

Well… Consider that under Gross Domestic Product criteria, war is a positive – war is an economic stimulant; the cleanup of an ecological disaster is an economic stimulant; clear-cutting old growth forest is an economic stimulant; fighting crime is an economic stimulant… and so on.

Now, consider Newfoundland fishing outports – isolated coastal communities of 300 to 600 or so souls, currently being dismantled for the second time since the province joined Confederation. Those are perfect case studies of the lack of a clear link between economic vibrancy and personal happiness.

In those communities, people have little – and want for little. They are labeled as the ultimate in "HAVE NOT" places. And it's true – they HAVE NOT any stately homes, or golf and country clubs, or BMWs in the driveway, or in-ground swimming pools behind their modest bungalows.

BUT…

They HAVE NOT any crime, or need of policemen, or lawyers or locks on doors.

They HAVE NOT any homeless people, or panhandlers, strip clubs, motorcycle thugs, muggers, armed robberies, Asian gangs, street drugs or water, air or noise pollution.

They HAVE NOT any traffic accidents, or drunk drivers, or traffic lights, parking meters, rush hours, or road rage.

They HAVE NOT any abused or neglected children, abused or neglected elderly parents, broken families, hungry people or disproportionate distribution of wealth.

Yet we are busily shutting down those communities and killing that lifestyle and that value system. As a result, the young people from those places move to the big city in search of the good life. Go figure!

Inevitably, that better life is equated to personal income; and standard of living is mistaken for quality of life; but they all eventually realize the priceless value of what they left behind. And they all ache to return home. *Saltscapes* magazine is about that home and those precious values – and more than 30% of our subscriber base is among ex-patriots living outside Atlantic Canada. We make their hearts ache, but they write and thank us for it.

We are categorized as a "lifestyle" magazine – but we see ourselves as a "quality of life" magazine. We seek to remind Atlantic Canadians that they are among the finest people anywhere – and that their family-based value system is enviable, and worthy of preservation. Surveys show that Atlantic Canadians have the highest rate of psychological wellbeing in the nation, the highest rate of mental health, and the lowest stress rates. Atlantic Canadians have the highest rate of community volunteer work in the country, and the most generous per capita donations to charitable causes in the country. Surveys also show that Newfoundlanders have the highest reported rate of sexual activity in the country – and that is, in my view, a much more accurate barometer of quality of life and personal happiness than Gross Domestic Product.

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We tell our readers about people who have moved to Atlantic Canada from elsewhere so their children may benefit from the exceptional quality of life. We tell them about people who have vacationed in Atlantic Canada and packed up as soon as they got home and moved back to take up permanent residence – or bought a summer place or a retirement home. But they know all this already. It just feels good to have it reinforced in print and beautiful pictures. We give them pride in place.

As outside influences increasingly erode the traditions and the value system of Atlantic Canada, especially among young people, we have our fingers stuck firmly in the dyke. We believe, therefore, that we are serving to link Canadians of common interest together. We believe that to be a worthy editorial mission. And we believe that no foreign magazine would, or could, ever provide that service.