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Promoting Geography in the Media¹

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“In virtually any form and on almost any topic, geography can fascinate people – [television] viewers based on my continuing correspondence, who include physicians, engineers, lawyers, and teachers ... and parents who contemplate a higher education for their children. I like to say that at its best, geography is communication ...”. (de Blij 1990, p. 37)²

Introduction

Geography has an image problem (Short 1998, p. 74).³ Professional geographers may be labelled as economists, urban planners, geologists, or environmental scientists in the popular media. Members of the public appear to hold outdated, if not antiquated, views of the business of geographers. Erroneous views about the discipline coupled with scant media attention⁴ imply a serious problem in terms of their consequences for decisions in matters such as student enrolments, public and private research funding, and university ‘rationalisation’. In short, public misconceptions about the work of geographers and a low public profile may have profound implications for the well-being and institutional longevity of the discipline. Perhaps there exists a need for

a repair strategy. One means of achieving change in public perceptions of the discipline is through effective disciplinary engagement with the media.

As well as on pragmatic grounds, that engagement can be supported on ‘intellectual’ bases. The various media are acknowledged widely to have power over the ways in which people develop their knowledges of the world (Burgess & Gold 1985, p. 1; Clarke 1995; Miller & Williams 1993; Myers, Klak & Koehl 1996; Jenkin 1999, Robinson & Levy 1996). Realities are created in the media. Public battles over contested meanings are waged here. It is on the pages of coffee-stained newspapers and the flickering screens of suburban television sets that truths are given wings.

Given these matters of practice and wisdom, it would seem astute for geographers to find effective means of communicating the products of their labours through the media.

Dealing with the media could continue to be left in the hands of individual geographers, but there may be some advantages (e.g. collective expertise; clarity of discipline focus) in devising a complementary national strategy which goes beyond useful public relations activities such as Geography Awareness Week. Further, it might reasonably be argued from the Constitutional obligations of organisations such as the Institute of Australian Geographers (1999, paragraphs 2.1 [a] and [b]) that we must give serious consideration to ways of employing the media such that the discussion of geography in Australia is promoted and advanced. By endeavouring to make Australian geography media savvy, accessible and available, we would be following a route already found by many other organisations to be important and productive (Schlesinger & Tumber 1994, pp. 50-52).

This short document outlines for discussion and elaboration the framework of a national media strategy suggested as a means of both changing the profile of professional geography and bringing to greater public attention the work of its practitioners. The paper concludes with a suggestion that the Australian geographers resolve to explore the practicalities of developing and applying a national media strategy.

Let me say first, however, that many geographers already have an outstanding means of promoting the discipline in the media – through the Public Relations and Media Units (PR&MU) that exist in every university in Australia (Colin Rudd, pers. comm., 24 Aug 1999). Many of these Units actually encounter difficulties getting enough information to disseminate through the media. By developing close working relationships with the expert staff employed in these Units, geographers around the country will have interested, expert and efficient access to the various media. Indeed, I would suggest that as a first dimension to any media strategy, each department of geography in each university nominate one of its staff members as a designated media liaison person. That person might be responsible for ‘finding’ stories within the department and local area that raise the profile of the department and the discipline and maintaining regular contact with the on-campus journalists/reporters. Of course, this mechanism might work only for a limited range of organisations excluding, for example, geography teacher and community organisations such as the Australian Geography Teachers Association of South Australia and the Royal Geographical Society of Queensland that do not have such institutionalised access to the media. Moreover, this approach is likely to see the discipline of geography overshadowed or obscured within some stories by the University promotion for which the PR&MU journalists are paid. It is, nevertheless, a very simple and potentially effective starting point if we wish to promote geography in the media.

Goals of the strategy

Having suggested that we would do well to exploit those opportunities that are already available to us, let me set out a larger scale media strategy that might complement and supplement the approach introduced briefly above. This has two goals.

First, we need to maximise media coverage of the activities and initiatives of geographers, thereby creating and preserving positive images and gaining recognition by audiences, which might include funding agencies and potential students. Second, we need to position Australian geographers and geographical organisations (e.g., IAG, Geographical Society of New South Wales [GSNSW], Australian Geography

Teachers Association [AGTA], Royal Geographical Society of South Australia, Inc [RGSSA], Royal Geographical Society of Queensland [RGSQ]) as ‘authorised knowers’, with associated access to the construction and shaping of the news.

In order to achieve these ends, three complementary approaches might be pursued. These are:

- understanding the media;
- positioning Australian geographical organisations and their members as ‘authorised knowers’; and,
- developing and applying effective strategies of information delivery.

Elaboration of strategy axes

1. Understanding the media.

If we are to promote geography in the media, we must first understand the media – its interests and operation. Some years ago, British geographer Roger Lee (c.1985, pp. 3-4) outlined four areas of (potential) media interest in geography:

- (1) in work/opinions/information affecting the local community (e.g., the very business of school or university project field work being conducted in a local area may be newsworthy);
- (2) in published research findings (e.g., on current issues, general findings that relate to everyday life or demonstrate a challenge or extension to areas of controversial interest [e.g., duration of human habitation in Australia]);
- (3) in subjects for articles/programs/features (e.g., on themes of general intellectual interest, such as the art and literature of Australian landscapes; alternative futures for cities); and
- (4) in the geographer as expert (e.g., regional expertise in political or historical commentaries).

Attuned to these areas, media liaison officers in academic departments or geographical organisations might find it easy to *see* day-to-day geography as something with media appeal and be able to communicate that vision to journalists and PR&MU staff. However, we may need to move beyond this rudimentary understanding of media interests and make them well-known to academic and professional geographers around the country.

We must also find out how journalists and the media operate. For example, how do different media – TV, radio, newspapers – work and what sorts of stories do they want? How do journalists create stories? It is clear that journalists generally seek information that will grab attention, and is easy to use, reliable, accurate and up-to-date. Less obviously perhaps, they also seek the ‘right’ kind of source – individuals and organisations which are seen to have some authority. There already exists some published discipline-based, local and offshore expertise on the workings of the media (e.g., Boyd 1995, de Blij 1990, Lee c.1985) from which we could draw in these explorations.

It is important too that we disseminate information about the operation of the media and learn how to use them through, for example, ‘professional development’ sessions at Institute/Society meetings. These sessions might be run by professional media consultants and could deal with issues such as ‘working within the newspaper editor’s 30-second, information-overload, decision-making window’, or ‘competing successfully with other individuals and organisations for media attention’. Skills in communicating geographical imaginations through the media could also be taught as a skills component of school and university geography topics and courses.

Finally, as part of our understanding we should monitor the various media and journalists. Who creates ‘good’ stories for geography? (and who ‘distorts’ or marginalise the work of geographers?). We could make such lists, including contact details of ‘friendly’ journalists, available to geographers through media such as IAG-List⁵ and the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia’s *GeoNews*. If I might return to PR&MUs, many of these already monitor their local media. They know who the good and poor journalists are. They know where to send particular stories and they

keep this information up-to-date. Where possible, we should capitalise on that existing expertise.

2. *Position Australian geographical organisations and their members as ‘authorised knowers’.*

If our research work is to be given public prominence and lent influence in a social environment where knowledge is acknowledged to be constructed and contested – that is, if we are to have a loud voice amidst the cacophony of competing claims to truth and intellectual authority – we must not only know how the media work but we need also to convince journalists that we are credible and accessible experts in the gamut of our intellectual endeavours.

Reporters seek sources who have public credibility and who are ‘in the know’. These ‘authorised knowers’ tend to be cited frequently in news features, press releases and Letters to the Editor. They are usually readily available and able to provide consistently high quality media ‘performances’. By virtue of their names (and perhaps the actions of their members in the past) and the implied national representation they offer, AGTA and the IAG may already have some status as an authorised knower with journalists (although perhaps Dick Smith would be called upon first to represent Australian geography in the media!). This position needs to be built upon. One strategy might be to provide influential journalists (employed by national newspapers and electronic media outlets) around Australia with a list of geographers who are expert in particular areas and who are willing to provide comment on that area at the sort of short notice typically required. The national list might be supplemented with state/regional listings. Many universities and professional associations (e.g., Flinders Asian Studies Association) already provide this sort of information to journalists in the form of a “Contact Directory” that lists staff members’ areas of expertise (Colin Rudd, pers. comm., 24 Aug 1999). The indexes and contents of those lists – vital in steering journalists to particular individuals with expertise – are, of course, shaped by journalists and public relations people rather than by geographers. That is something we could remedy.

And while it might be a relatively minor matter, an overall strategy to promote geography in the media and position geographers as ‘authorised knowers’ should also encourage members of geographical organisations to clearly identify their contributions as having been made by a geographer, rather than by an ‘industrial analyst’, ‘demographer’, ‘hydrologist’ or ‘teacher’.

My final suggestion on ways to promote geography in the media is to develop and apply effective means of information delivery.

3. *Develop and apply effective strategies of information delivery.*

Effective information delivery comprises four related parts: packaging a coherent ‘product’ (Lee c.1985, p. 1); targeting the audience; marketing geography; and protecting the image of geography.

First, to ‘*package a coherent product*’ we need to identify individuals who can usefully represent Australian geographical organisations as well as the breadth of the discipline. Perhaps we might consider seeking out a media liaison person for each state. This does not preclude individual geographers working through any institutional PR&MU to which they have access in order to publicise their work, but where appropriate and possible, state representatives might co-ordinate the discipline’s media representations. The state representatives – each of whom might be expected a close working relationship with any one of the institutional PR&MUs that currently exist in Australian universities – could also provide an avenue of access to the media for those geographers who do not have access to institution-based media consultants. Clearly however, much of this extra-institutional work would be done as a ‘favour’ by PR&MU staff. It may also be appropriate to seek from within the ranks of geographers the services of a professional national media liaison officer (with any costs associated with this being shared by all interested parties) who could lead and co-ordinate a national strategy.

Second, we need to *target our audience*. I shall not dwell on this matter here except to say that we should direct stories to named journalists and media outlets we know are

likely to offer (favourable) coverage and to restate the importance of developing links with PR&MUs that will allow that end to be achieved most efficiently and effectively.

It is critical of course that we *market geography* more effectively by alerting the media to newsworthy work of geographers; stress the interpretations geographers might bring to an event; announce new events and research findings; and circulate carefully written media releases containing geographers' interpretations of topical issues. This might involve us in 'making the news' by identifying issues, signifying their newsworthiness; and featuring geographers and geographical organisations in a favourable light. As I noted at the outset of this paper, many of us already have access to means of achieving these ends. What we need to now is make use of those often underused (Colin Rudd, pers. comm., 24 Aug 1999) resources.

Finally, as we heighten our public profile we also need to *protect the image of geography* with the media. For example, we should not comment on areas outside our expertise. We should deal with media queries promptly. And we should send 'thank you' letters to those journalists who have treated us fairly. This positive reinforcement may have useful effects although it is most likely to be effective in our dealings with PR&MU which typically have lower staff turnover than newspapers and television stations (Colin Rudd, pers.comm. 24 Aug 1999). Of course, we also need to devise strategies for dealing with any case of unfair treatment (e.g., an AGTA or IAG President's letter to the Editor in any cases of 'unfair' treatment).

Conclusion

To conclude, I have suggested that geography needs to be promoted more actively in the media. We already 'write the world' through journal articles, books, working papers and other semi-public output, but I fear that we have tended to neglect even more public and potentially more powerful ways of inscribing knowledge. We may also have been rather shy about letting the public know what roles we play in, for instance, knowledge creation, community activity, and regional, national and international affairs. That shortcoming may now be critical in a national context

where geography is under threat on a variety of fronts (Beer 1998) – including disciplinary mergers, budget cuts, and curriculum revisions.

I have suggested here and elaborated on several means by which we might promote geography in the media. We must first understand the media. What are their interests and how do they operate? We must locate ourselves as ‘authorised knowers’ in the public eye. And we must develop and apply effective strategies of information delivery – packaging the discipline, targeting our audience, marketing geography and protecting our image.

These are simply some suggestions to provoke discussion and, more importantly, action. I look forward to your responses.

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¹ For an extended discussion of some of the ideas covered in this paper, see Hay and Israel (2001, in press).

² de Blij is referring here to his popular segment on geography on the 'Good Morning America' show.

³ For example, Zoe Morrison, South Australia's 1998 Rhodes Scholar and a geography Honours graduate commented at a public lecture in Adelaide (31 August 1999) that someone in a bar had observed that she "must be a real whiz at colouring in maps".

⁴ Perhaps as much through good fortune as media expertise, some individual geographers (e.g. T. Griffith Taylor, J. Macdonald Holmes [Powell 1986]) may have achieved a high media profile, but professional geography as a whole has no coherent strategy for enhancing its public profile through the various news media.

⁵ To find out more about the IAG's listserve, IAG-list, visit <http://www.ssn.flinders.edu.au/geog/iag/iaglist.htm>.