

When Journalists Rely on Diplomats, Ottawa ‘Spins’ the News

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Canadian diplomats abroad seek to shape coverage of their work. And the more nefarious their actions the harder they toil to “spin” what they’re doing as something positive.

During a recent interview Real News Network founder Paul Jay described how Canadian officials in Caracas attempted to shape his views of the country’s politics. Jay noted:

“[My first trip](#) to Venezuela in 2004, I was producing the big debate show on Canadian TV called Counterspin on CBC Newsworld. ... I was a known quantity in Canada. And so when I was in Venezuela, I said I’ll go say hello to the Canadian embassy. I was trying to figure out what was going on in Venezuela. I figured some Counselor would pat me on the head and say welcome to Venezuela.

“No, I got the number two chargé d’affaires that greeted me and brings me into a meeting room with seven members of the opposition who then for two hours beat me over the head with how corrupt the regime was, how awful it was, and so on...

“What business does a Canadian embassy have with bringing a Canadian journalist into a room with opposition people, essentially trying to involve me in a conspiracy against the Venezuelan government. Canadian government role in Venezuela was promote and nurture the opposition.”

Around the same time Canadian officials sought to convince Jay that Hugo Chavez’s government was corrupt, former *Montréal Gazette* reporter Sue Montgomery had a similar experience in Port-au-Prince. In *“[Parachute Journalism](#) in Haiti: Media Sourcing in the 2003-2004 Political Crisis”*, Isabel Macdonald writes:

“Montgomery recalled being given anti-[President Jean-Bertrand] Aristide disinformation when she called the Canadian embassy immediately after she had been held up by armed men while driving through Port-au-Prince days before the [US/France/Canada] coup. Canada’s ambassador to Haiti, Kenneth Cook, told her, ‘We’ve got word that Aristide has given the order to the chimeres [purported pro- Aristide thugs] to do this kind of thing to international journalists because he’s not getting any support.’ According to Montgomery, Cook had urged her to tell the other international journalists who were staying at the same hotel: ‘I think you should let all your colleagues at the Montana know that it’s not safe for them.’”

Given only two days to prepare for her assignment, Montgomery was ripe for official manipulation. Though she later realized the ambassador's claim was ridiculous, Montgomery told other journalists at Hotel Montana (where most international journalists stay in Port-au-Prince) that Aristide's supporters were targeting them.

The Canadian embassy in Port-au-Prince succeeded in influencing Canadian reporters' coverage of the country. In her MA thesis titled "Covering the coup: Canadian news reporting, journalists, and sources in the 2004 Haiti crisis," Isabel Macdonald concludes that the reporters dispatched to Port-au-Prince largely took their cues from official Canada.

"My interviews revealed that journalists' contacts with people working in the Canadian foreign policy establishment appear to have played a particularly important role in helping journalists to identify appropriate 'legitimate' sources."

CBC reporter Neil Macdonald told Isabel Macdonald his most trusted sources for background information in Haiti came from Canadian diplomatic circles, notably the Canadian International Development Agency where his cousins worked. Macdonald also said he consulted the Canadian Ambassador in Port-au-Prince to determine the most credible human rights advocate in Haiti. Ambassador Cook directed him to Pierre Espérance, a coup backer who [fabricated](#) a "massacre" used to justify imprisoning the constitutional prime minister and interior minister. (When pressed for physical evidence Espérance actually said the 50 bodies "[might have](#) been eaten by wild dogs.")

Almost all Canadian correspondents develop ties to diplomats in the field. Long-time *Globe and Mail* development reporter John Stackhouse acknowledges "Canadian political officers" in Indonesia for their "valuable insights" into the country during General Suharto's rule. In [Out of Poverty](#), Stackhouse also thanks "the Canadian diplomatic missions in Accra, Abidjan and Bamako [for their] ... invaluable service in arranging interviews and field trips." During a period in the mid-2000s when she wrote for the *Globe and Mail* and CBC, Madeleine Drohan [conducted](#) media workshops in Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya and elsewhere sponsored by the Canadian embassy, High Commission and Foreign Affairs (she taught journalist ethics!).

"[One of the best](#) Canadian foreign correspondents of the 1970s," Jack Cahill discusses some ways diplomats relate to reporters in *If You Don't Like the War, Switch the Damn Thing Off!: The Adventures of a Foreign Correspondent*. "The Canadian government", the former Toronto Star reporter notes, "can be good to foreign correspondents if it thinks they are reliable and I had two passports, one for general purposes and one for difficult countries."

In what may reflect his nationalism, Cahill dubs Canadian diplomats "more reliable" than their southern counterparts. Disparaging his US colleagues, he writes:

"There is little doubt, however, that some US foreign correspondents depend almost entirely on their embassies, and thus indirectly the CIA, for their information. It is, after all, the natural thing to be attracted to the truth as propounded by one's own countrymen in the Embassy offices, at the official briefings, and on the cocktail circuit. It's this information, with its American slant on world affairs, that eventually fills much of Canada's and the Western world's news space."

Jay described his experience at the Embassy in Caracas mostly to highlight Canada's long-standing hostility to the Hugo Chavez/Nicolas Maduro governments. But, his story also helps make sense of the dominant media's alignment with Ottawa's push for regime change in Venezuela today.

Globe and Mail Latin America correspondent Stephanie Nolen, for instance, promotes Canada's last ambassador to Venezuela. Describing Ben Rowswell as "[widely respected](#) by Venezuelans while he was there", Nolen recently retweeted Rowswell claiming:

"the coup happened in July 2017 when Maduro suspended the constitution. The question now is how to fill the void – by backing the president who uses force to remain in power after his term expires, or the leader of Venezuela's last remaining democratically elected body?"

Rowswell has been quoted in at least a half dozen *Globe and Mail* articles about Venezuela in recent weeks.

Diplomats' influence over international correspondents is one way the foreign policy establishment shapes discussion of Canadian foreign policy.

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