

RESOLVED: THAT THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR DOESN'T GET A FAIR DEAL FROM THE MEDIA.

POINT : **BOB WYATT**

I am frankly well beyond frustrated by the media coverage of Canada's voluntary sector. Or perhaps it might be more appropriate to call it non-coverage.

Oh, sure, there are the "fluff" stories – so-called human interest stories, usually featuring children or small animals. And there are, of course, the so-called scandal stories – somebody embezzling money from a charity or allegations of compensation that is too high. And around Christmas, there are always the stories about how desperate Charity A or Charity B is for donations before the end of the year.

Don't get me wrong. Stories about how a charity touched somebody's life are important: they help demonstrate effectiveness. And stories about people who abuse public trust will always be newsworthy.

But there is so much more that is not printed or broadcast. Or, at least, it is not published as something about the voluntary sector.

Let there be even a hint that somebody somewhere is thinking about a tax increase, and the media are climbing over one another trying to get to the spokesperson for this business association or that. It's not as if what they are going to say will be a surprise.

But who is calling people from the voluntary sector to ask what will be lost if there isn't more revenue? Or if this cut or that will be made? What will be the impact on the community? How will individuals be affected?

When there is discussion about trade arrangements, politicians and business associations are all over the news. But who is speaking about the impact on local communities when jobs disappear? Or where are the interviews with people who work on development activities in those countries where the jobs will go, asking them about the impact on the communities and on the environment in those countries?

All of this reminds me of a great line I read in a letter to the editor a few years ago. In his commentary on whatever the topic was, the author said: "I used to live in a society, now it seems I live in an economy."

DON BOURGEOIS is Editor of *The Philanthropist / Le Philanthrope*.
Email: donbourgeois@thephilanthropist.ca

BOB WYATT is Executive Director of the Muttart Foundation.
Email: bwyatt@muttart.org

And the stories that *are* published about the nonprofit sector leave a lot to be desired. Columnists and commentators have had a field day with pieces about executives of charities and how highly they are paid. The analysis in these pieces was usually limited to reporting the number of individuals who were shown as having salaries above \$100,000 when charities filed their Canada Revenue Agency tax returns.

Given the tone of the presentation, it is no surprise that online comments had much the same tone – generally expressing absolute outrage that someone working for a charity could possibly be earning that much money.

Not once in any of these articles did I see any analysis of the sector, or even any investigation about these so-called excessive salaries. I did not see even one piece which raised the question of whether we really wanted someone who made less than \$100,000 running a hospital or a university. I did not see one piece looking at the demographics of the sector, in which only about 10% of charities have annual revenue of more than one million dollars. I did not see any discussion about the roles of those people who make more than \$100,000. And not once did I see someone asking why people believe that any other entity – government or private – can have overhead costs, but that somehow, charities are immune to things like rent, utility bills, or computer costs.

As politicians go around repeating the chestnut “It’s about the economy,” not once have I seen a columnist write that it is – or should be – about the society that the economy is meant to serve.

The end result is that people have a distorted view of the sector – if they have any view at all.

If newspapers wrote about agriculture or the retail trade with as little understanding as they do the charitable sector, there would be hell to pay. So if we are bigger contributors to the gross domestic product than any of these sectors – to say nothing of our contributions to quality of life – why are we always experiencing coverage that, at best, is superficial?

The sector has to bear some of the responsibility for this, of course. We have not done a good job at helping journalists understand what and who we are as a collective. We have not told them why we operate the way we do, how broadly based we are, what things get in our way. We have not identified leaders in communities who can provide a local reaction. We have not reached out.

But the largest blame belongs to the media. Much of the coverage I see amounts to nothing more than lazy journalism. Even self-proclaimed investigative journalists seem totally unable to figure us out and write stories – positive or negative – that are well-researched and demonstrate appropriate analysis.

There are exceptions to be sure. There are a few – precious few – journalists in Canada who have taken the time to understand the sector and to offer informed – if not always positive – commentary.

The sector deserves better. Canadians deserve better.

We agree on two things: journalists do not understand the sector and have not invested the time and effort to do so; and the sector's press coverage is very poor.

Clearly, journalists do not understand the context in which the sector operates – or even various sub-sectors – and do not appear interested in doing so.

I recall years (decades?) ago – as a new government employee I went on a course on how to deal with the press. The course was offered by a former journalist, who made two points that have stuck with me throughout the years: do not believe what you read in the press – everyone knows it is wrong; and the first thing a journalist does is goes to the old stories and accepts them as being truthful and complete.

We have all had the experience: in our own lives attending a public meeting and finding out that what you thought had been discussed was not discussed; or rather, that the reporter reported on something entirely different from your own recollections. And then there are the “good news stories” about a charity or event and we know the full truth about what happened, which is not exactly as reported by the journalist.

But what do we do about it? How do we change it? And I deliberately say “we” because we know the journalists won't change it on their own. They do not have the interest, time, or support from the publishers to do so. “We” need to cause change because only “we” have the interest to do so.

But how do we do it? First, we recognize that we have done a terrible job in telling our story. If we had done a good job, we would not be reading stories about highly paid executives. Indeed, in a recent provincial election campaign, the pay levels of CEOs at hospitals was mentioned in the televised debate not once, not twice but, if memory serves, three times. In a recent municipal election campaign, municipal support for arts and culture, social services, museums, environmental enhancements, even Christmas, was tagged as “gravy” and not worthy of “taxpayer” support – a story repeated too many times to count. It is not at all unusual for the press of all political and ideological stripes to comment about how important community groups are and how society would be worse off without the sector; but to then revert to making comments about the sector as being “not essential,” or not part of the “core,” or a frill given the “economic conditions.” While the press has failed to tell our story accurately and completely, it is our failure more than the press's failure.

Second, we need to take steps to do what is necessary to tell our story. As part of these steps, we need to know what we need to say. Having sat on many boards and provided legal advice to even more, I am repeatedly surprised by the inability of many boards to articulate a concise but comprehensive story that is a compelling one – as to why “we” exist and why the world would be worse off if “we” did not. There has been a lot of whining. And it has seldom been concise. The story also needs to be part of a communications strategy – it is not a one-off interview but rather part of an overall strategy to communicate a consistent message using multiple opportunities, including annual reports, interviews, public meetings, photo opportunities, op-ed pieces, and so forth.

Third, we need expertise. We need to invest in communications. Just as we need to invest in so many other areas, we need communications expertise on staff or available to help develop the message and to communicate that message. If people think a CEO responsible for a \$300,000,000 budget should be paid only \$30,000, we need to communicate why that is a really dumb idea. But as you can see, calling it a “dumb idea” is probably not the best communication approach and perhaps my message could be massaged.

So, some will say that we are too “pure” to have our messages massaged. That is what others do; those who are trying to lie to the public do such things. Okay, that is one perspective. I can only ask “How is it working so far?” It’s not. There is a critical difference in knowing what your message is, ensuring that it is accurate and complete (including the negatives), placing it in a strategic context, and getting it out effectively and efficiently to those who you need to hear it on the one hand, and lying to the public on the other. Lying does not work. Telling the truth in a credible manner, in a way that people will hear and pay attention does work – or at least has a better chance of working than sitting back and letting others tell our story without context, information, or analysis.

And that gets me to the National Engagement Summit. The Summit is addressing a number of priority issues where we have not done a good job of understanding what the fundamental problems and issues are, their context, what the public needs to know and why, and so forth. One outcome I hope comes from the Summit will be an understanding that we have a story to tell, that we need to tell it (whether it is organization-specific or sector-wide), and we need to tell it using a strategy that causes the press to understand and to help communicate our message.

That strategy includes educating the press but that is only the start. So, perhaps we have a new program called “take your journalist out for lunch” – though only after we have figured out what we want to say and how best to say it.