

**SPEECH TO ANNUAL MEETING
URBAN LEAGUE OF LONDON**

**By Philip McLeod, Editor, The Londoner
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I understand Richard Florida was your first choice for speaker at your annual meeting. I'd have come to listen to him, too. I don't know how far down the list you had to go before you got to my name, but I appreciate the opportunity just the same.

I was told I could speak about anything I wanted – which I should tell you is not the kind of instruction you should give to someone who spends all day gathering fairly useless facts, convinced they are all interesting and important. Nevertheless, I have tried to find a subject that would interest me and you – and would relate to both the business I'm in and the role your organization plays in the long-term improvement of our city.

So I picked journalism and community-building – the latter because it's fate will be influenced to a considerable degree by significant changes the former is now facing.

Journalism is, of course, about gathering facts. But in the way it has evolved in this country, at its best journalism was – and still should be – about community building. Certainly, one important function of journalism is to bring publicity to those things – be they people or processes, projects or principles – which are not performing in a socially beneficial way so problems can be corrected.

But another important function of journalism is to bring publicity to those things which are working well, so citizens gather hope other issues can similarly be resolved.

Too much of the first, obviously, can be overwhelmingly negative – a criticism often levied against journalism in these early years of the 21st century. Too much of the second can be overwhelmingly positive – a criticism often levied against The Londoner. Great journalism, I think, is an intelligent blend of both.

But there is a third function of journalism, as a builder of solid, well-rounded communities which is achieved by the simple device of telling stories about and passing along information to those who are its citizens. This is an element much in peril as main-stream journalism faces economic collapse.

So here's a question upon which to focus over the next few minutes: If the major daily media in London – The Free Press, the A-Channel, the most popular radio stations – tomorrow stopped reporting all local news but the big crime, accident and scandal story of the day, what would you do?

In fact, that's almost where we are today. In the past 20 years, the number of reporters gathering news by the principle daily media in London has declined by more than 50 per cent.

And as the internet continues to slice away advertising dollars, that reduction in news gathering feet on the street will continue. And is the internet replacing those lost jobs? Today, although there are at least a dozen internet sites in London which claim to provide some form of local information they employ exactly two journalists.

So what has been lost? Well, the daily media no longer provide detailed coverage of city council meetings, only sporadic coverage of board of education meetings, and virtually no coverage at all of volunteer recognition, service club gatherings, community meetings and guest speakers – to give but a sample of a long, long list.

So I'd like to make three points.

First, a newspaper or a 6 o'clock television newscast must be more than a litany of today's bad tidings and troubles the world over, however clever the graphics and video. In fact, surveys show what people value most in their media are signposts and roadmaps to events in their community. Listings, in other words, for bazaars, church suppers, workshops, fundraisers, church and community meetings of all types which are the principal gathering spots for social interaction – and therefore community building.

One of the attributes, in my view, that has kept London a relatively sane place in which to raise a family is the fact most of us use the entire city for employment, education, shopping, recreation and entertainment. We don't fear dark corners anywhere. And part of the reason, I believe, is that we have traditionally been regularly exposed to opportunities for those activities in all parts of the city.

I know this because The Londoner provides the most extensive list of community, entertainment and sports events, volunteer opportunities and the like in the city. And almost daily we receive feedback on the numbers of participants various events have attracted and where in London they came from – which is from all over. They come, they learn and discover, they go home and talk

about it to friends and neighbours. As Martha Stewart would say, this is good.

My second point is that while readers and viewers love lists, the media is far less inclined today to provide them.

The Free Press, for example, facing significant staff cutbacks last year, eliminated its community event listings totally. None of London's media – and this includes The Londoner – provide anything close to complete coverage of city council meetings, far less to provide any context.

And long ago the daily media decided those little good news squibs, such as cheque presentations and volunteer events, were too trivial to bother with, robbing readers and viewers of one positive reinforcement that other real, caring, human beings share the same piece of geography called London.

Cut off from this important communications vehicle, many local organizations both public and private have resorted to creating their own publications, both on and off line. The Council of Canadians, Children's Museum, Western, London Public Library – to name just four which came across my desk today – have news letters or publications. Hundreds more, including the Urban League, have extensive websites which list events and news of interest to their members.

Not to be overly critical, but one significant shortcoming of all of these sources is they tend to highlight only those items that relate specifically to them or with which they agree – which means you're not likely to read a flattering article about a developer in the TREA

newsletter any more than you've find a cuddly piece about an environmentalist on the London Development Institute's website.

More the pity because if, as many people do, you live totally within the narrow interest of your favoured group you're cut off from any objective notice of what others are doing, good or bad. And if you're like me, and subscribe to large numbers of email newsletters and blogs to simply to know what's going on, after a while it all becomes an overload of spam in the mailbox and you're forced to recycle or refuse.

Some institutions – the political arms of the city and boards of education are prime examples – don't even try to explain themselves. For example, essentially only two of city council's many decisions last Monday night got any coverage – the approval in principal of a ban on the sale of bottled water at city facilities; and the re-instatement of a \$1.3 million study into the effects of climate change on London. If you want to find out what else happened you'll have to wait until the council minutes are published on the city's website days later. And when they are (and if you can find them) you'll read something like this (from the city council minutes of May 12)

“Controller Hume presents the 16th Report of the Board of Control. Controller Hume moves that clauses 1 to 7, inclusive, be adopted. Councillor Usher moves, seconded by Controller Hume, that clause 7 be amended in line 3 by deleting therefrom the words ‘BE APPROVED’ and putting the words ‘BE HELD’ in bold and upper case. CARRIED. The motion to adopt clauses 1 to 6 and clause 7, as amended, is put and CARRIED.”

What does that all mean? To find out, you then have to backtrack to the minutes of the previous Board of Control meeting to discover council has just approved:

- 1) a sewer maintenance contract to a Hamilton company;
- 2) an infrastructure repair project on Argyle St.;
- 3) a watermain replacement project contract to a London company;
- 4) a sewer replacement project on Regent St.;
- 5) an \$85,000 consulting contract to a Toronto firm, purpose of which is not mentioned;
- 6) \$2,000 for a luncheon for the Canadian Association of Science Centres when it meets in London this week; and
- 7) a committee of the whole meeting, which was in fact held earlier today, to consider a draft of community strategic plans.

It shouldn't be that hard.

While brings me to my third and final point. If listings and community news events are important community building blocks but are no longer being adequately covered by the daily media, what should a city striving to be among the best in Canada – which is one of London's stated ambitions – do about that?

My prediction is that sometime within the next couple of years, either because of dwindling resources and / or because their respective managers believe the subject boring, The Free Press and the A-Channel will further reduce their coverage of city council. Reporters will show up, as they do now to board of education meetings and other major events, only when something of sufficient

controversy appears on the agenda or they get a self-serving tip from a participant.

Already, as I've shown, important events already escape the attention of readers and viewers. Well here's one radical solution.

I think we should consider objective information about community events a city utility, to be gathered and disseminated to the citizens in the same way water and power are provided now.

There could be a basic service, covered in your property taxes, which would include council and other local news highlights and a calendar of community events. If you want more detailed coverage you could make arrangements to pay separately for this service.

Such service could be streamed into your home via the internet, delivered by fax or the mail carrier, depending on your preference. It could include video clips, sound bites, detailed analysis and all the relevant background reports if you so wished. The technology to do these things exists today – in fact, at City Hall for the most part and all of it will be there if recommendations of the governance task force are accepted.

Many theories are advanced for dwindling voter participation in civic elections. One consistent theme, however, is the disengagement of voters by reason of ignorance and apathy and much of that can be traced back to the trivialization of, or absence of, timely reportage of community affairs by the news media.

I see no indication mainstream news media in this city will alter the path it currently is on, and little indication the so-called emerging

media see objective reporting of public affairs a worthwhile endeavour.

If you do – and it seems to me this is a core belief of the Urban League – then my challenge is to start thinking about some better alternatives.