

***What Color is the Sky on Their Home Planet?
Lessons Learned from Collaborations in the Bizarre World of Mass Media and Public
Appearances***

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From mid-2004 through the end of 2007 I had the opportunity to focus extensively on media and public appearances as an advocate for the field of conservation. Since I have long held a passion for teaching folks how they could preserve their own heritage artifacts it was an amazing opportunity to spread the principles and practices of conservation to audiences whom I would have probably never been able to engage otherwise. These opportunities derived from not only my longstanding practice of public speaking and teaching but most notably the publication of a book titled “Saving Stuff” for the Simon & Schuster imprint Fireside Books, and the following publicity. That endeavor included dozens of public appearances and scores of television and radio appearances, and literally hundreds of inclusions in print media. On the official release date for the book, I had two television appearances, five radio interviews (first one at 5:45 AM, last one ending at 1:00 AM) and five print interviews. An intense time of public exposure immediately following the release of the book in June 2005 eventually calmed down, but engaging the public remained part of my central activities for another two years, including filming a lengthy segment for a C-SPAN documentary and a pilot for the Smithsonian Networks and feature articles in numerous publications.

This period was mostly one of success, occasional instances that were less successful, (no career killers, but having one person show up for a public presentation is a humbling experience) but most of all one of intense learning on my part. I became increasingly aware of a skill set necessary for communicating in the public square, skills that are almost unknown if not downright antithetical to the mind-set of most conservators. For whatever motive, most conservators accomplish little in the world of mass communication, an unfortunate situation given the compelling nature of our work. This is a missed opportunity almost impossible to calculate.

Think of the last time you attended a social event populated mostly by non-colleagues. What was the response when you told people what you did for a living? My guess is that it went something like this: “Wow, that sounds like the neatest job ever!” And the respondents were correct. What we do is really neat. It takes a fair bit of effort to render our work uninteresting, but if the typical conservation conference presentation is any indicator, we are definitely up to that task. Some years ago I was meeting a friend in the lobby of the AIC conference hotel for dinner after the session. He arrived early, stuck his head into the presentation hall, found me and sat down until the session was over. Later he asked simply, “Man, how often do you guys do that to yourselves?”

As a profession we are inept at communicating beyond our boundaries because we choose to be. But it is a natural human activity that need not be overly odious if we accumulate even the most rudimentary skills. Talent is definitely not a prerequisite for success in this arena; just turn on the television if you doubt me.

There are many opportunities and frustrations in seeking out public exposure for conservation, but neither is unlimited and the latter is not insurmountable. In this paper I will present three sets of concepts I learned along the way to help you steer through the reefs. First is the rationale for seeking a higher awareness of conservation within the media and the general public. Next comes my interpretation of the skill set you need to cultivate and practice in order to do it better than you did it before. Finally comes a litany of things you have to learn to tolerate if you embark down this path.

Good luck!

Why Cultivate the Mass Media and Public?

The benefit of communicating about what we do to a broader world strikes me as self-evident, but as I look around at the conservation landscape it is apparent that few of my colleagues understand or acknowledge the urgency. Certainly it is not being acted upon very well.

For starters, very little of the world we inhabit even knows of our existence. If you've ever been introduced as a "conservationist" you recognize the problem. My favorite introduction was as a "From Washington, a Conservatorialist [sic] from the Smithosian [sic] Institute [sic]." I almost wish they would have identified me as a "Washington-based conspiratorialist." At least that would have been closer.

But the problem goes much deeper than a malapropism from someone outside the seminary: virtually none of the society we inhabit recognizes artifact conservation beyond the context of blockbuster projects, such as the Statue of Liberty or the Star Spangled Banner or mega-dollar artworks. They have no idea that such an enterprise calling itself "conservation" even exists on a day-to-day level. That is entirely our own fault.

Even worse, in my opinion, is that the public and mass media have no idea about the principles and practices we espouse, even though these ideas would be helpful in helping them preserve their own personal and family heritage. It is a very short step from preserving family heritage to preserving community heritage, and but a hop from there to preserving societal heritage and institutional collections. Yes indeed, I believe there is a gigantic cadre of willing accomplices for artifact preservation out there, all they need is to be recruited.

Becoming well known publicly can be an integral component to marketing a private practice, garnering grants for specific projects, obtaining fiscal strength of an institutional lab, or even maintaining the existence of yourself within the institutional framework. Funding entities, whether from the voluntary sector or the confiscated sector, appreciate and enjoy seeing their efforts recognized and touted as being instrumental in the continuation of good works. They

don't necessarily see conservation support as part of their overall communications strategy, but it never hurts your cause with them either. You will not find any fixed relationship between publicity and funding but it is all part of the calculus. The whole world of marketing and advertising is built on this foundation.

Conversely, seeking to be simply left alone within your marketplace or institution, never searching out avenues for presenting your work is – not to put too fine a point on it – career suicide. Being invisible within an institution's hierarchy is only a tiny shuffle away from being absent from the institutional hierarchy. There is an old saying about conflict within academia and non-profits:

The smaller the ship, the meaner the rats

If you are not visible and well-known, the meanest rats will eat you in a heartbeat once resource allocation becomes contentious. Like, for example, tomorrow.

Finally, the greatest benefit to cultivating a public presence through the media or presentations is that it can be plain old fun. In all my years, only once has my presence been met with apathy, much less hostility. People think what we do is too cool for words. Invariably their enthusiasm is invigorating and contagious, even for an asocial curmudgeon like me.

The Skill Set

The good news is that working with the media and the public does not require any specialized theatrical talent and training but instead relies on a fairly narrow set of skills that are “will” oriented. If you want to become good at these collaborations, you can. If you don't, you won't. In fact “skill set” may even be overstating the case, as many of these attributes are as much temperamental as they are facile, but they are all improvable with practice.

Here's my short list:

- Comfort at being on display
- Speaking clearly and concisely
- Affability
- Camera and microphone comfort
- Wardrobe
- Script writing
- Story boarding
- Marketing and promotion
- Self appraisal

Comfort at being on display - If you are so uncomfortable with having people look over your shoulder that you go into a catatonic paralysis, then being on public display may not be your cup of tea. I could be rude and tell you to get over yourself, but I realize that some people are simply pathologically disinclined for this aspect of the task. Some years ago I was speaking at a

conference and one of the other speakers was so uncomfortable and nervous I thought they might literally faint. But the paper was presented and the presenter survived, and although I did not know this person I was extremely proud that they could get to the end.

Like almost everything else, being on display gets easier the more you do it.

Speaking clearly and concisely - Can you get your point across in thirty minutes? Fifteen minutes? Five minutes? Fifteen seconds?

Unless you have practiced getting a message communicated quickly, the odds are not in your favor. Conservators are notorious for taking forever to get to the point. We resent our correspondents' desire to pronounce the bottom line, as we believe it undermines our elegant scholarship. Get over it, and get to the point.

Consider the following two scenarios, wherein two folks are riding on an elevator. One of them is a conservator, one of them is not.

Opportunity Lost - Two Dopes on an elevator

ONE: Nice day. Too bad we're stuck in here.

TWO: Sure is a beaut. Fortunately I'm not really stuck here.

ONE: You don't work for Dewey, Cheatham, and Howe?

TWO: No, I'm just here to consult with Mr. Dewey.

ONE: Really? What do you do?

TWO: I'm a conservator. (*With arrogant pride*)

ONE: (*sneering after brief pause*) W is an idiot.

TWO: Huh?

ONE: Bush is an idiot.

TWO: What's that got to do with me?

ONE: Huh. I guess you're an idiot too. All conservatives are idiots.

TWO: I'm not a conservative, I'm a **conservator**. (*Emphasis added*)

ONE: (*much relieved*) Oh, cool. I watch the Nature Channel all the time.

Elevator bings.

ONE: (*getting out*) Nice talking to you. Good luck with the baby seals.

TWO: (*shouting around the door*) Conservator, not conservationist. I fix broken stuff...

Consider how different the scene is when the conservator has thought things through enough to get to point more quickly.

Opportunity Found - A Concise Message

ONE: Nice day. Too bad we're stuck in here.

TWO: Sure is a beaut. Fortunately I'm not really stuck here. I just came in from my studio.

ONE: You don't work for Dewey, Cheatham, and Howe?

TWO: No, I'm just here to consult with Mr. Dewey.
ONE: Really? What do you do?
TWO: I'm in conservation. We help people preserve their most precious artifacts, from the family Bible to Grandma's wedding dress to priceless artworks.
ONE: You preserve all that stuff?
TWO: I specialized in furniture and decorative arts, you know, old silverware, candlesticks, stuff like that.
ONE: Wow. How'd you get into that?
TWO: It takes quite a bit of experience and learning on everything from fine art to cutting edge materials science. I've been learning non-stop for over fifteen years, and I'm one of the new ones.
ONE: That's gotta be about the coolest job ever. What's the neatest thing you ever fixed?
TWO: Oh, probably the *[fill in the blank]*
elevator bing
ONE: *(holding the elevator door open)* Hey, my dad has Che Guevara's cigar box. I'll bet he wants to talk to you how to preserve it. Can I have your card?
TWO: Sure enough *(has one handy)*
ONE: Thanks man. I'll give you a call. *(Leaves)*

One of the hardest things I've learned in the past few years has to do with **attention span**. For most of the media and the public, it's really short. You have to capture their attention before you can spin long, complex yarns. Once while I was filming a pilot for a cable television series, I was waxing eloquent on some technique for preservation. When I was done the director asked the cameraman for the time code. The answer was that my explanation took about 35 seconds. The director asked me how I could cut the explanation into six or seven segments. That's right – broadcast type presentations are targeting audiences with a **five second attention span**.

Unless you learn to string together snippets rather than spout soliloquies, your efforts will wind up on the cutting room floor.

I love doing radio interviews, especially those with caller participation. It enforces a certain discipline; I have to say something useful in a few seconds, or a minute at most. Long droning soliloquies are memorable in their forgettability. If I could not fit into their mold, I would never be invited back.

Affability - Can you project congeniality? For hours at a time? Be it fair or not, the media and the public prefer not to interact with cranky people. Except, perhaps, to ridicule them. We're a friendly bunch for the most part, so just keep that going and you'll do fine.

Hint: humor is a boon, especially gentle wit, so use it whenever it is appropriate.

Camera and microphone comfort - There's no such thing as "personal space" when a camera or microphone are involved. They are in your face at close range all the time. Learning to "act naturally" in a most unnatural setting was hard for me. The C-SPAN crew used to laugh at me for always talking to them and not the camera. It was a very difficult habit to break, and one I

gravitate toward even now. The camera is the audience, and that's just plain weird when it's only a foot from your face.

Wardrobe - Those of you who know me are probably chuckling before I even say anything. Alas, video HATES plaid. I'm a lifelong member of the "Plaid Flannel Shirt Club" so overnight my entire wardrobe was obsolete except for my radio appearances. It came as a great discomfort to buy a whole new set of clothes for myself, emphasizing solid colors and casual business attire. Fortunately the system can tolerate lively suspenders, so at least I had something.

Wardrobe is such an important part of video production that there are usually at least two people keeping track of it for continuity when filming requires several sessions spread out over days, weeks, or months. For single appearances, ask someone where you are appearing what clothes they would like you to wear. Or even bring several options. It's a simple thing. And if the blow-dried hostette is wearing a cranberry outfit, your choice of burnt orange will present a problem that be easily avoided if you can substitute something in a powder blue.

I cannot believe I'm talking like this.

Script writing - Actually, skillful writing of just about any sort will be helpful. No, wait, that's not correct. Skill at writing a good detailed conservation report will be a severe detriment to communicating in the world of normal humans as that sort of writing is esoteric, arcane, and off-putting. Conservation reports are to writing what medical transcriptions are to speaking: jargon filled compilations purposefully incomprehensible to anyone who does not know the secret handshake. If you want to put someone in the media or the public to sleep, hand them a long, convoluted Treatment Report (is that redundant?). Works every time.

What you need to do is participate or even control the process that puts words in your mouth, and making those words sound life-like. You must stake out this territory early in any production or you will find yourself fighting with the crew about every single line, and you will get the well-deserved reputation of being "difficult to work with." Jump into the creative process as soon as you are able. Craft the words yourself ahead of time so you don't have to eat them later.

Story boarding - Not surprisingly thinking visually is one of the most important things when dealing with the media. After all, we are visual creatures for the most part. One of the first video producers I worked with kept yammering about "What the camera sees." It's a difficult thing to conceive at one level, as you are not where the camera is, you are what the camera is pointed at.

Even when dealing with radio, paint word pictures with your phrasing and word choices. Learn to use analogies that the average person can identify with.

Marketing and promotion - Yes, you must involve yourself in the icky world of marketing and self-promotion. The reason for it is straightforward: either you craft your message, or someone will craft it for you, and usually they will get it wrong.

In a sense you have to envision yourself and your message as commodities that need packaging

and shelf space on the media supermarket. Last summer I had a summer intern, not unusual in itself, but this time my intern was a marketing student rather than a conservation hopeful. She was fabulous at pulling together not only my past appearances into a manageable record, for creating a publicity package for use in the future.

Make a press kit for yourself, and think about having a boilerplate press release ready to go, needing only the title and details to be filled in (the place where you put the particulars you are trying to announce). And, know where to send them!

We live in a world with an insatiable “news,” infotainment, and propaganda apparatus. They have to fill their seconds and inches with something, and it might as well be you.

Self appraisal - You don’t necessarily need to become your own harshest critic (I promise you that others will eagerly volunteer for that task) but you do need to take the time to study your performances. I try to have my public and teaching presentations filmed whenever possible, and yes, I do sit and watch them afterwards. It’s about as much fun as a root canal, but like everything else, you have to practice and critique yourself in order to hone your presentation skills.

This often leads to places you don’t expect. When you are a viewer, suddenly that favorite story just doesn’t work, or worse, serves only to impart confusion. Or your presentation wasn’t suited for that particular audience. Or that one gesture looks stupid. Don’t pick your fingernails on camera. Stop saying “obfuscation” and “deleterious.” You need a haircut. Tuck in your shirt.

Things to Tolerate

In addition to the attributes just listed, you have to learn to tolerate a whole lot of things if you want to swim in this particular pool. The media and the public are at their best when you can deal with them on their own terms, not on your own terms. That means you have to overlook a lot of potential irritants as you work with them.

- You will be misquoted
- You will be inconvenienced
- You have to repeat yourself... a lot
- You have to be schedule-flexible
- You must subjugate “truth” to “facts”
- You will be fussed over
- You must look and sound right
- It’s not all about you
- You will be criticized by colleagues

You will be misquoted - Here’s a shocker; the mass media won’t always get it right and your words will be misquoted, misrepresented, or downright mangled. They do it to the President, they do it to famous people, they’re gonna do it to you. Live with it. Even when you are doing

radio or video, you can be edited in such a way as to completely miss the point. You cannot control that. Live with it. The mass media is not picking on you, it's just how they operate. My experience is that the people in the media are usually exceedingly talented at, well, being in the media. Their knowledge about anything we might think of as important is nearly nonexistent. Given that, there's no way for them to know what is real, true, or important. Live with it.

You will be inconvenienced - If you want to collaborate with the mass media, you have to expect that they live in their own operational framework, and that it most certainly bears little resemblance to yours. If you insist on not being inconvenienced, pretty soon you will not have to worry about it because the media opportunities will dry up. Rearranging your workspace for the umpteenth time because that's how it works better on camera is just part of the price of doing business.

You have to repeat yourself... a lot - Revisiting a shocker from a few lines ago, you will find yourself working with media folks whose knowledge is, um, incomplete when it comes to what you do. Or about anything else in reality. You have to repeat yourself a lot when dealing with them. In one interview for what turned out to be an excellent newspaper feature article, I spoke the same information FIVE TIMES over 90 minutes, and still some of the details were presented incorrectly. I've just learned that sometimes if I have thirty seconds, I may only present ten seconds of information, but I'll present it three times in the hopes that it will stick. If you are filming, you may have to do a "second take" or a third or an eighth. And if you speak to the public, remember that each time the audience is hearing your ideas and information for the first time. Don't cheat them, they deserve better.

You have to be schedule-flexible - When dealing with the media everything takes twice as long as you expect, and you often have half as much time as you need. The odds of you and the film crew being ready for the same activity at the same time are slim and none. Being prepared and ready on a moment's notice will garner you a lot of credit that you may have to draw against at the right time.

You must subjugate "truth" to "facts" - Truth requires a lot more time than you will ever have. You don't have time for a complete context required by "truth" so stick to the facts. You have to attribute a certain honesty to the audience to seek out more information to construct the truth, but you simply don't have the time. Knitted together the facts you present can form a larger fabric but you have to learn to be economical with your words and ideas, and prioritize them.

You will be fussed over - Maybe it's just me, but having people fuss over my face and hair and clothes is kind of creepy. It's probably something I could get used to given enough decades. Every time I went on camera it happened, except for C-SPAN. They were brutally honest. However you looked was how they filmed you. For studio appearances I even took to carrying my own brush, hair spray, and skin deglosser pads. I **really** cannot believe I am saying this.

You must look and sound right - The media and the public are looking for congenial authority figures; do you look like one? Do you sound like one? You needn't be young and beautiful and

mellifluous. But you do need to look comfortable in your own skin, and you have to project a quiet expertise. If you are not a good presenter, you can fix this with a speech class at the local community college. Diction, syntax, and cogence count.

It's not all about you - I hate to tell you, but the public sees you as an entertaining side show and the media sees you as a programming commodity, not a person. Your mission is to present the ideas of preservation and conservation, so you may have to set aside some of your own amusements for a time. Learn to focus on the people you are trying to inform. They have a passion about their heirlooms, not you.

You will be criticized by colleagues - To a certain extent I was ready for the waves of criticism that never emerged. For the most part my colleagues, especially outside the workplace, were enthusiastic about my efforts. In part I think that was because I was encouraging my audiences to support their local museum conservation efforts and to patronize private conservators with their own family heirlooms. That is not to say that everything was peachy all the time. While I heard few direct face to face criticisms, over the years I have heard utterances like

“He didn’t deliver perfect information.” (In other words I presented facts rather than truth)

“He’s diminishing the nature of the professions” (by demystifying it)

“You are harming your reputation and professional stature by speaking to the general public.”

“Who does he think he is?”

“Don is such an egomaniacal media hog.”

Fortunately I have a reasonably thick skin, and the confidence that I am right and my critics are not.

The Rewards

In the end I have found great rewards in seeking out new avenues for presenting conservation and preservation. For starters I get to witness (and hear follow-up later) people changing their behavior at a fundamental level regarding the preservation of their own heritage artifacts. There seem to be a lot of people interested in the message; thus far I have had hundreds of exposures for The Cause, and the invitations keep coming. I have been able to enhance and broaden my own experiences and expertise in the preservation of material culture through interactions with thousands of people and their artifacts. And finally, if I let myself go, it can be a whole lot of fun.