

RYERSON REVIEW OF JOURNALISM

South of the Border Down Mexico, Guatemala, Brazil, Chile and Argentina Way

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CBC's Connie Watson is Canada's only English-language correspondent in Latin America. She scrambles from country to country, but too many of her stories go unheard. Why?

Outside the central market in La Matanza, an industrial town on the edge of Buenos Aires, a crowd of journalists and camerapeople stands on a wet three-tier bleacher. Correspondents from BBC, the Japan Broadcasting Corporation and Al-Jazeera are among about a hundred journalists waiting for the presidential candidate Cristina Fernández de Kirchner to take the stage and deliver her last speech before Argentine election on October 28, 2007. Past streams of cameras and microphones, CBC Radio reporter Connie Watson stands alone in the corner. Her head is covered by the hood of a plastic rain poncho. Below her brown eyes are smudges of purple eyeliner, and her face gives off a cold sheen. She turns to the sea of Kirchner supporters below her and lowers her long black CBC-emblazoned microphone into the crowd. Some Argentines wave Halloween orange, powder blue and lemon yellow flags. Groups of men beat marching-band drums. Other clap and chant waiting for Kirchner, who is the wife of current president Néstor Kirchner. The lonely microphone capturing the din is Canada's only media monitor, since Watson is the only full-time reporter assigned to the vast region of Latin America.

Many of the campaign rallies Watson has covered in Latin America work the same way: almost like film extras, masses of "supporters" are given soda, food and sometimes a bit of money to appear at the event. They fill the space and make the candidate look like a populist hero. She has seen it in Mexico, Venezuela and throughout the region. Watson isn't taken in by appearances the way a reporter flown in to cover the event might be. As CBC's Latin America correspondent, Watson does everything from filing radio and occasionally television stories from different corners of the region to all of the administrative duties that go into running the bureau based in Mexico City. She does the banking, accounting, returns the phone calls, sends out packages, calls the cabs, does all the research and hires additional staff when she goes on the road. Without the time and resources to comprehensively cover the region, Watson does what she can, but it is never enough. The region is immense and its presence in the Canadian media is either shallow and sporadic, or filtered through an American perspective.

The region south of Miami and the Rio Grande, known collectively as Latin America and the Caribbean, encompasses Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central and South America. In 1965, Southam News Services attempted systematic coverage of Latin America when Pat Kidd opened a bureau. The bureau lasted two years. More than 15 years later, *The Globe and Mail* sent Oakland Ross to open a one-person bureau in Mexico City. Ross arrived in 1981 when Central America was blazing. Civil war raged in Guatemala and El Salvador. The Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua was only a couple of years old. "Central America had just exploded with newsworthiness and geopolitical significance," says Ross, who now covers the Middle East for the *Toronto Star*. Journalists from Europe and North America started covering the region. The bloody military dictatorships and brutal murders may have made all Latin American countries seem the same, but of course they weren't.

By 1988, the *Globe* had two bureaus in the region: one in Mexico and the other in Brazil. But in 1990, the Mexico bureau was closed. In 1995, the *Globe* told Rio de Janeiro bureau chief Isabel Vincent it was "restructuring" and was shutting down its remaining bureau in Latin America. When the American Free Trade Agreement came into effect in 1994, Radio-Canada and CBC opened their first joint Latin America bureau in Mexico City. But the CBC bureau lasted less than five years. In a series of massive cutbacks at the corporation, the Mexico City, Cape Town and Paris bureaus were closed in 1999. CTV opened a Mexico City bureau in 2001 only to close it in 2004.

The lack of a Canadian perspective in Latin America made Watson push to open a CBC Radio bureau in the region. "Most of the reports came through American journalists, which had nothing to do with the history Canada has with Latin America," she says. "We have to leap over the U.S. because it has been so intricately involved in so many notorious things in Latin America, from what happened to Salvador Allende to what happened to nearly every Central American country."

From 2001 to 2004, Watson was a national Alberta reporter based in Calgary for CBC Radio. In 2004, the network decided to make full-fledged foreign correspondent. At the time, CBC was thinking of expanding its foreign coverage. Jamie Purdon, then director of radio news programs, says that as soon as the possibility of a Latin America bureau came up, Watson came to mind. "It seems like a really good fit with Connie. She is very passionate about that part of the world."

On a sunny Tuesday afternoon in Buenos Aires, two days before Kirchner's speech, a lively crowd is starting to gather outside the office INDEC, a government-run statistical agency. Many of the people standing on the pavement hold lit cigarettes between their fingers and

streams of thick smoke spin up over the crowd. Whistles shriek continuously. A woman beats a red tin cup with a spoon. Another drums an old cake pan. The mood is almost jovial. Most of them are INDEC employees protesting the Néstor Kirchner government's manipulative inflation statistics. The government has been telling employees to shuffle the numbers. Watson weaves in and out of the crowd—she appears to be the only foreign journalist at the rally. She stops. On the fringe of the crowd, she stands and holds her CBC microphone up in the air. She walks over to a group of women who seem to be waiting for her. "For instance, they say that the inflation will be nine and the inflation must be done nine," says one of the women in staccato English. "So they must lie and we don't want lie." Watson then speaks to a woman who works for a consumer protection group. The woman has been receiving threatening phone calls warning her not to talk about inflation or the government's problems with statisticians. She fears for the safety of herself and her children. More people are out on the sidewalk outside the building. The air grows smokier. The clank, clank, clank of the women striking metal on metal intensifies.

The tin cup isn't a random noisemaker. Empty-pot-and-pan protests gained notoriety in the 1970s in Chile during a period when food scarcity was spawned by political and economic instability caused by the election of Salvador Allende. Today Argentina's overheating economy makes it difficult for people to put food on their plates.

"If inflation were a disease, Argentina would have a chronic case of it, including a number of economic near-death experiences," Watson reports. "Inflation was so bad during the 1980s that hungry Argentines rioted and looted stores searching for food." With inflation rising, the economy again is the big issue. Although it has recovered since its last near-death experience in 2001 to '02, the economy shows signs of struggling again. Steering the economy away from another collapse will be Cristina Kirchner's greatest challenge.

Back at the La Matanza rally, Watson is quietly practising her script with her assistant, Buenos Aires-based Canadian journalist Dav Makinson. The story is slated to air Friday on CBC-TV's *The National*. Radio-Canada cameraman Benoit Roussel will shoot her standup at some point during the rally. The rain has stopped and her honey brown hair falls on her shoulders. A patch of silvery white occupies a place right above the centre of her forehead (in the same spot her mother first went grey). Watson is a slim woman with a placid presence. She has small brown eyes and a slightly gap-toothed smile. Since she works for CBC Radio, this TV piece will be an extra, one that Watson barely fits into her demanding schedule. She appears tired and pasty. She files radio stories sometimes three or four times a day and she sleeps very little tonight. The night after, she won't sleep at all.

But two days later, on election day, Watson walks around the brightly painted buildings in the Boca neighbourhood of Buenos Aires. Dressed in a fuchsia tank top and lime green floral pants, she looks healthy and rested. But her appearance belies her disappointment. "They spiked my piece," she says as she looks through a row of paintings at an art shop. *The National* story that she worked so hard to fit into her schedule was scratched from the show's Friday line-up. She received a note saying *Saturday Report*, a broadcast with about one-fifth as many viewers as *The National*, would use it.

As a high school student in the Peace River district in northern Alberta, Watson wanted to be a writer or reporter. The isolated stretch of land where she grew up was the last area to be homesteaded in Canada. Her parents raised cows, chickens and pigs. The six children lived on the cheese, meat and eggs that the farm yielded. The house had no running water. There was no telephone until Watson was in Grade 7.

In northern Alberta, where the daylight in summer can stretch out to almost 19 hours, Watson read as much as possible. She learned about the world through books and the radio. At night she would fall asleep listening to the radio, which would pick up distant signals from cities as far away as Vancouver, Seattle and Portland. It was her connection to the vast world that she someday wanted to explore.

Watson had a childhood fascination with Africa, but when she was about 16, she discovered Latin America in the pages of a book. She was captivated and struck by the way people in Latin America approached their lives. "I can't really put my finger on it. They are able to accept the things in life that would throw us a curve if we were in North America, but they accept it in Latin America. They accept the whole idea of death as not being the final end of your life."

After high school, Watson moved to southern Alberta to study journalism at Lethbridge College. While completing her degree, she worked as a country-music disc jockey at CJOC-FM. After graduating with honours in 1981, she started working full time at the radio station as an anchor. She then worked as an anchor and reporter at all-news radio stations in Victoria and Vancouver.

In 1987, Watson quit Vancouver's CKWX and moved to London, England. After knocking on a few doors and sending out tapes and resumés, she soon found herself working as a radio correspondent for NBC. But after about two-and-a-half years, Watson grew tired of working for the network. "I have to say, when I worked in London for the Americans, there were certain things they wanted to cover. And that didn't involve the Royal Family or something to do with the U.S. they didn't really care about the news, and that got to me after a while."

Before she left London, Watson moved in with a diplomatic family from France that was stationed in London. "I thought a good Canadian journalist should speak French," she says. Her plan was to live with the family and then study at the Sorbonne for a year. She was intending to move to France directly from England but she got lured back to Canada to be a bureau chief for Standard Broadcast News. But by accepting the job, she told the news agency that she was only available for a year. "I intended to keep a promise to myself to study for a year in France by the time I was 30 years old." In 1990, she fulfilled her goal of learning French at the Sorbonne. After a year, she moved to Ottawa, where she soon started her career at CBC as a freelancer. Her first full-time CBC radio job was as a parliamentary reporter for *The*

House. In 1994, she won a Canadian Foundation for the Americas fellowship and spent four months in Chile. Before starting the CBC bureau in Mexico, she had reported from Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Arctic.

For Watson, radio reporting is all about the texture. A typical feature, "Sell the Rain," aired in 2003 on CBC Radio's *The Current*. It looked at the water problems in Cochabamba, Bolivia, but Watson went to the streets to get the story. She opened with a depiction of a Fric Cochabamba with different gangs of musicians playing music on the street. Young men watched as clusters of girls passed by. Parents took a stroll down the street with their children. People ate and drank at the outdoor cafés that lined the street, but had a little trouble talking. "They're being blasted by trumpets and trombones," Watson said over the blare of horns, "so close the diners could reach over and drop their buns down the shiny tubes." There is a loud burst of music "at the restaurant on the corner, as two miniature versions of marching bands close in on the patrons. They're playing different songs, trying to drown each other out. It's a battle," she said. The music continued, the sounds layered on top of each other awkwardly. "The last real battle on these streets was played out to much more menacing sounds, the sounds of hissing tear gas canisters, rocks pinging off riot shields and the reloading of rifles." This story is the perfect example of what Watson does best. She creates a vivid sonic backdrop that resonates.

Watson loves to work on feature-length stories. She is a frequent contributor to *Dispatches*, a weekly radio program that airs international documentaries from CBC foreign correspondents and freelance journalists. On an overcast October afternoon in Toronto, *Dispatches* senior producer Alan Guettel is waiting for Watson to file a story on the foreign takeover of the tequila industry in Mexico that will air on a special harvest edition of *Dispatches*. Sitting upright in his chair, Guettel opens his email and scans it quickly for a message from Watson. Nothing. He leans back resignedly, scratching his head, knowing that her piece will be worth the wait. And it is. "It was a whole side of the agribusiness that we hadn't heard about," he later says. Watson also made the most of her trip to Tequila Valley by spinning a few radio online pieces on the plant. "She ended up with a whole series on something we hadn't even talked about," says Guettel, adding Watson always produces high-quality work that is rich and unique not only because of her talent for bringing people to life, but because she understands how to look at a news story. "Some of the biggest stories are about the regular things that people do and think. People don't exist to be analyzed. They don't exist to have their pulse taken."

Watson lives in Condesa, a fashionable part of Mexico City filled with coffee shops and restaurants. Her office is in her beautiful apartment building designed in the style of one of Mexico's most famous architects, Luis Barragán. The building is distinctively Mexican: "spartan, rustic and modern all at once," says Watson. While she loves her job, it is physically and mentally exhausting. "Every day you are disappointed what little you're able to do, and it's very hard to feel satisfied because of that." She works hard, but despite all the hours she puts in, she can't be everywhere. "There is still so much you don't get on the air, because every time you're not there when Chávez makes a move, you think, okay, how many days, weeks or months can I afford to be there? How much time can I afford to spend there when I go? How long does it take? How many letters before they let me into Cuba? A lot of effort goes into that."

A lot of effort goes into reporting about the region for a Canadian audience. Radio-Canada's Latin American reporter Jean-Michel Leprince is constantly fighting for more airtime for his Latin American pieces. "You can't ask for foreign stories the same length because in Ottawa and Quebec people don't have the context. I have to give them context," he says, sounding frustrated. "It is a fight against my own colleagues."

Leprince, who now covers Latin America from Montreal, has struggled with the foreign desk since his days as a correspondent in Mexico. His coverage of the 2007 Guatemalan election was only partially shown by the network. With polls closing late on a Sunday, Leprince had to file a story without the election results. He sent a story on Monday, and it was pulled. "There was not even a small text about the results of an election we have covered very much the last few days, so it's this kind of nonsense. And of course, the others don't have the story at all and since you don't see it elsewhere, well, it must not be important." The same thing has happened to Leprince several times. "I am not the only one to complain, and there are apologies. It's too late."

Unlike Leprince, Watson does not struggle with CBC Radio's foreign desk. It is interested in her stories, but Watson's stories don't appear that often on the flagship show *World Report* and the supertime show *World at Six* because of the extensive preparation time. Her bureau is seldom driven by breaking news, and she is usually on the road chasing stories. When she goes to Bolivia, for example, she pitches stories about apparent trends in the country. "When people haven't been paying attention to Bolivia, you say who won the election and they'll say, 'So what?' I think you have to get them engaged to the point where they will see the bigger context," she says. "My goal to a certain degree is to get some stuff on the air, which beats what we were getting on the air, which was nothing."

Another Canadian journalist writing stories about the region is ex-*Globe* Latin America bureau chief Isabel Vincent. She left Rio de Janeiro in 1995 when the *Globe* bureau closed. Now based in New York, last year she was back in Brazil writing a book about Brazilian-born philanthropist Lily Safra. Aside from working on her book, Vincent also freelanced for American and Canadian publications. She worked on a retainer basis with *Maclean's* magazine, where her pieces appeared at least twice a month for more than two years. Vincent finds that her American clients, including *Time* and *New York Times Magazine*, are much more interested in her stories than the Canadians. "Canadians are kind of like, 'Okay I guess, if we have to do it, we will do it.' I don't know. It's just this parochial thing. New York is also very parochial. I mean, they don't care what happens outside New York. But the magazines, I think because they have more money, have more readers too. They will more read

take a piece than the Canadians will," she says. "I don't know what goes on in editors' heads, but I just know it's easier dealing with New York than Toronto."

In the week leading up to Kirchner's victory at the polls, the *Globe* ran one story on the Argentine elections. No *Globe* reporter went to Argentina. Foreign editor Stephen Northfield says, "It's an interesting story, but it's the same thing. Am I going to spend 10,000 bucks to go to Argentina? Why?" The fact that her win was pre-ordained made the story "less interesting." He also thought the story wouldn't be of enough relevance to *Globe* readers to warrant the expense. "It isn't going to change the world," Northfield says. "It's not going to make the dollar go up or down or change oil prices. It's not going to cause instability in the Middle East."

Despite the fact that he doesn't find the region as geo-politically significant as others, he hopes to open a bureau in Latin America so Northfield was recently given resources to open a new bureau and plans to open one in India, but he maintains Latin America is next. Opening a bureau in India was more pressing, he says, and the news from the Latin America region "tends to be internal and contained in way that doesn't reverberate in a significant way outside of Latin America."

Canadian media are always finding a reason to avoid giving ink to the region, says Annette Hester, a Calgary-based economist and a foreign affairs and trade strategist. "The media, as far as I am concerned, are being incredibly lazy and condescending to the Canadian reader," she says. "In spite of all this talk about the Middle East and 9/11, and the dependency on oil security and energy markets, the U.S. is dependent on over 50 per cent of its energy needs on the Americas, so it is a very short-sighted view." At the moment, Venezuela is world's fifth-largest oil exporter, and Brazil is the world leader in alternative fuels. With the growing emphasis on alternative energy, Hester says, it is difficult to understand why Canadian publications think the region doesn't resonate in the world.

Canadian mining companies also have major interests in Latin America and their operations are usually mired in conflict. "We are huge players in international mining. Huge players in investment all across the region," says Maxwell Cameron, a professor of political science at the University of British Columbia who specializes in Latin American politics. "We've got mining companies in Guatemala that are dispossessing people off their land so that they can mine land with the local armed forces, and you can see it on YouTube. This stuff is absolutely at your fingertips if anybody wants to follow it, and again there is no coverage," he says. "Our image in the world is connected to this. I think Canadians, if you ask them, are not remotely aware of our mining in the region. I think this is something people would care about."

Haiti is another country neglected by the press. It is the leading beneficiary of Canada's development assistance in the Americas; over the next few years Canada will contribute \$520 million in foreign aid to Haiti. "I would say we are woefully, woefully, woefully short on coverage of Haiti," says Carlo Dade, the executive director of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas. The Canadian coverage is "exceedingly negative," Dade says. "Haiti as a basket case, Haiti as a long and continuing history of nothing but failure etc., etc., etc.—those are the tones of the stories that have been coming out. Elsewhere we have seen bits and pieces of positive coverage." According to Dade, Haiti has witnessed some success, but only American newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Miami Herald* have reported on the positive "glimmers" from Haiti. The Canadian interest in the country is significant. "We spend so much money in Haiti, our number two foreign aid recipient after Afghanistan. Considering the amount of government ink, the amount of academic ink that lists Haiti as priority for us, you would think there would be a concomitant coverage in the press."

As well, Latin American immigration to Canada has grown steadily since 1970. Because of Canada's open-door immigration policy, 68,000 Latin Americans arrived in Canada between 1969 and 1973. Then, a wave of refugees escaping from brutal regimes in Chile, El Salvador and Guatemala arrived. At the moment, the Latin American community is also one of the fastest growing cultural groups in Canada; the number of people reporting Latin American heritage rose by 32 per cent between 1996 and 2001, while the overall Canadian population grew by only four per cent in the same period.

While many Latin Americans leave their homeland because of poverty, human rights issues and crime, the region is one of the world's most ecologically prosperous. Latin America has the world's largest reserves of arable land and is full of many important commodities such as oils, metals and foodstuffs. Brazil contains more fresh water than any other country in the world. Chile is among the world's top fruit producers and exporters. In 2006, the region had an estimated eight per cent of the world's proven oil reserves, and accounted for almost a quarter of U.S. oil imports.

Latin America's natural jewels may be a factor in the Conservative government's shift in Canada's foreign policy. The story about that renewed interest has been almost non-existent in the Canadian media. Stephen Harper announced in July 2007 that Latin America will be one of his government's priorities. Details have been scant. Why the new direction? Dade sees it as a major story. But it isn't being articulated very well by the government, nor is it being covered by the Canadian media. He says, "Even if the government has not been very skillful or robust in getting its message out, then the role of the press is to say, 'Hey, this is important' and they are doing a poor job of getting it out, so that's another story that has been missed."

Watson thrives on human stories that engage and resonate with listeners. The focus on everyday human struggles and the lack of investigative journalism is what Annette Hester feels is problematic about her reporting. "Her soft humanitarian approach may be quite in line

with the CBC and quite in line with very interesting reporting, but it doesn't make her reporting from the region essential for the CBC," she says. "I would hope if she is the only reporter she could be pushing the limit to show how this is important to Canada and why it is important with hardcore stories that are relevant. I don't see those stories."

While she tries to do some Canadian stories, Watson admits, "I could do more stories of what Hester is talking about if we had a working and functioning bureau. If we had someone to make the calls, if you had somebody to sit in the background and do three or four days research the way *the fifth estate* has, or some of the other shows, but those are the kind of things I just cannot invest enough time in." Watson maintains that without a staffed bureau her journalism is vulnerable to criticism. "We could do a much better job, but so could everybody in every newspaper television and radio station in Canada that is deciding that this region is not important enough to send anybody down to it."

At 540 hectares, the group of tin sheds known as the Mercado Central de Buenos Aires in La Matanza is the biggest and most important indoor market in Argentina. In a few days, Kirchner will have her closing rally on the market's grounds. But today Watson and Makinsor looking for potatoes. Last year's bad harvest has led to a scarcity in potatoes not only in Argentina but also in the two countries (Brazil Holland) that usually export to Argentina. Prince Edward Island potatoes are being shipped down to Argentina to keep up with demand. Because P.E.I. potatoes have not been seen on Argentine soil for 25 years, this is a significant import. In the midst of hundreds and hundreds of produce stands they quickly spot a single stand selling the burlapped potatoes. The 25-kilogram bags are stacked about three metres high, and "Product of Canada" is printed near the bottom of the bag in faded blue ink. Watson, takes her long black microphone from her leather tote bag. She holds it in front of the potato vendors and starts working on a story that no other journalist here will write.