

Bill Rea ? Public scrutiny has its pains

I was talking to a colleague not too long ago, and he was lamenting a bit about the scrutiny guys in our line of work are subjected to. He was thinking mainly of public scrutiny. All of us who are gainfully employed, after all, have to put up with bosses looking over our shoulders. But there is a difference when the public is watching you.

It's sort of one of the occupational hazards of working in the media. Since the product of your labour is before the public, the public, with justification, believes it has the right to comment, and not always nicely.

I'm perhaps making it sound like a bigger burden than it really is. In my line of work, reaction, either positive or negative, is welcome. It's a sign that people actually care about what you're doing. It is also a fact that people are more inclined to make their views known if they're angry than if they're happy little campers. So the snidest remarks I get, while they might be meant with the worst intentions, absolutely make my day.

There are also people out there who think we are on the public payroll. I know I'm not. This is a private sector operation. I have never worked in the public sector, and have the lack of a pension plan to prove it (financing for my retirement will come from the thriftiness with the money that I have and my annual contributions to RRSPs, something my late father nagged me to make sure of from the day I entered the workforce). So while I do consider what I do to be public service, I don't consider myself a public employee.

Actually, many, if not most, of us work in public view. If your job requires you to mix with members of the public, then you're subject to public scrutiny. It's just some of us have more of it than others.

With the exception of mowing neighbours' lawns as a kid, just about every job I have ever had has involved dealing with lots of strangers, be it through waiting tables or serving customers in a Canadian Tire store; and that doesn't even start to take into account the total strangers I encounter in my current occupation.

I'll grant that dealing with the public is not always easy, although I doubt I would have it any other way. True, you are sometimes subject to abuse, both verbal and physical. In my table-waiting days, I had to take a lot of obnoxious comments from people who didn't like the way their food was cooked (I didn't do the cooking), and I have been roughed up a few times on the job. On the other hand, you do get to meet some interesting people and collect some pretty good stories, which other people may or may not believe. I have often told the story of the time a United States Secret Service agent planted a very firm elbow in my gut (we were both on duty for an appearance in Toronto by former president George H.W. Bush). I hope people believe me, but if they don't it's not that big a deal.

Some of us seek such public scrutiny through the occupations we get into. For example, if one is going to seek and hold elected office, they had better get used to the idea of being in the public eye. Toronto Mayor Rob Ford has been heard at times complaining about some of the implications that come with being a public figure, especially when it concerns his home and family. While I'll grant there has seemed at times to be a bit too much intrusion into his private and home life, I think it's also true that his attitude has been the cause of a lot of the excessive scrutiny he's had to deal with. If you're going to stoke fires, be prepared for the resulting heat. Besides, he knew all that going in, or at least he should have known.

Politicians are also subject to criticism, both from the public and guys like me. In my case, it's part of my job, and there are certain rules I'm obligated to follow. With members of the public, there's a lot more latitude, although there are lines they had better not cross.

Professional athletes are in a similar class, I think. True, they are blessed with a certain God-given talent, and they have worked hard to develop it to a point where someone was prepared to pay them to use it. Why do they put themselves through all that work, pain and self-sacrifice? It's not just for the fat pay cheques. It is a fact that the top pros in sports get paid a hell of a lot of money, but that wasn't always the case. During the time I have been on this earth, athletes got paid a pittance. It was the creation of rival leagues in sports like hockey and football that resulted in players' salaries going up substantially. There are some who argue that resulted in the product being watered down too. I haven't decided how correct that is.

When I laced up my skates as a kid, or even when I ran outside for a session of street hockey, I dreamed, and so did every kid who was ever like me. We were too young to understand any more about money than what was contained in our weekly allowance. We weren't dreaming of wealth. We were dreaming of adulation from the fans. We wanted the roar of the crowd. We wanted to be in the public eye. We wanted to be heroes.

When they achieve that status, professional athletes get the attention they have craved all their lives, and they get the public scrutiny that goes with it, and it sometimes isn't very nice. The Toronto Maple Leafs, after all, blew a 4-1 lead in Pittsburgh last week, and the Penguins' goalie could have sat on the bench for the last 25 minutes of action reading a copy of the Caledon Citizen and the

outcome would not have changed one little bit. All of the public scrutiny they received after that effort, I would contend, was well deserved. It may not have been nice, but it was fair, especially considering these guys actually live what so many of us only dreamed.

If these guys have craved the adoration of fans, then dealing with the scorn when they proverbially ?blow it? goes with the territory too.

And that goes for politicians and goes for us in the media too.

We in the newspaper business occasionally pull boners. For example, I freely admit I am not a great speller. I believe my Grade 8 teacher still lives (I spoke to him at a function about three years ago), and I'm sure he would confirm what I just stated. Granted, ?spell-check? helps a lot, but it's not fool-proof. And while I proof read what I write, it is a fact that the worst possible person you can get to proof copy is the person who actually wrote it. Unfortunately, when it comes to proofing for the Citizen, I'm the only game in town. That means the occasional goof makes into print. They are bloody embarrassing, especially when people notice them and let you know, via emails or voicemails. Some of you have probably noticed them yourselves. And be assured; there are going to be a lot more.

If nothing else, I'm consistent

