

## It was shoddy journalism that cost Andrew Potter his job at McGill

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<https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/03/24/it-was-shoddy-journalism-that-cost-andrew-potter-his-job-at-mcgill-hbert.html>

By CHANTAL HÉBERT National Affairs Columnist

Fri., March 24, 2017

MONTREAL—It was shoddy journalism not a debatable take on Quebec society that cost former Ottawa Citizen editor Andrew Potter his ‘dream job’ as head of McGill university’s prestigious Institute for the Study of Canada this week.

He failed to let the facts get in the way of a good rant.

Potter wanted to make the case that Quebec — contrary to its collective belief — suffers from a chronic deficit of solidarity. He had statistics that he believed demonstrated he was on to something.

Maybe he was, maybe he was not: that was not the real point of the exercise.

A public intellectual should stir the occasional hornet’s nest, even at the risk of painful stings.

Like all good columnists Potter looked for a peg for his arguments. Piggybacking a story that already has a lot of traction is a sure shortcut to a large audience. It pays to pick one’s moment.

One will, for instance, write about Finance Minister Bill Morneau’s learning curve as a political communicator around the time of the budget and not in the dead of summer.

From Potter’s perspective the episode that saw hundreds of motorists left stranded on the Montreal section of a provincial highway for an entire night at the time of last week’s massive snowstorm fit the bill. It is not clear why he would have come to that conclusion.

By all accounts those left stranded by the authorities on Highway 13 managed to avoid serious harm by going out of their way to help each other.

As a Montrealer by adoption, I have never found the kindness of strangers to be in shorter supply in Quebec than in my Ontario birthplace. Last week’s storm was no exception.

Absent any evidence to back up his core contention that the Highway 13 saga was a manifestation of widespread societal alienation, Potter fell back on sloppy generalizations about routine double-billing on Montreal restaurant bills (for tax evasion purposes) and ATM machines that spout out \$50 bills by default.

Those were demonstrably false. It begged the question of whether Potter was confusing Montreal with Absurdistan.

Contrary to what is becoming popular belief in some media circles, Quebec's political class did not rush to the barricades to denounce the column. The media dragged it there.

The first to voice serious concerns about Potter's arguments were journalists who had cause to know better. On social media, the Montreal Gazette's veteran restaurant critic Lesley Chesterman was among those who led the charge.

McGill University waded in to the fray with a tweet dissociating itself from Potter's column.

That should never have happened.

But before concluding that political pressure forced the university to intervene, consider that McGill — a Montreal institution that more than most reflects Canada's language duality — was also probably reacting to internal stresses among its staff.

Judging from some of the letters-to-the-editor published this week, some of Potter's academic colleagues were up in arms over his column.

Universities should not be in the business of endorsing or repudiating the views of the academics they employ. But by the same token, nor should McGill have defended an indefensible column.

Potter himself retracted part of it the next day. Any columnist working for a serious media organization would have had to do the same thing or else ended up having a public editor do it in his or her place.

Alternative facts should not be the stuff that acts of journalistic courage or martyrdom are based on.

At the end of a week from hell Potter is out of his job as director of McGill's Institute for the Study of Canada. It is not clear that he resigned of his own free will or under duress from his employer.

But even if the university had gone on bended knees to beg him to stay on, Potter should still have relinquished the position.

McGill's Institute for the Study of Canada is not a run-of-the-mill university department. A significant part of its mission is to contribute to the larger Quebec conversation. McGill's rather unique position at one of the key junction points on the language map makes that contribution essential.

It would have been hard going forward for someone who is — for now at least — widely perceived as willing to think the worst of Quebec and Quebecers to operate the institute to its full potential.

In closing, I hope Potter stays on in Montreal and at McGill where he continues to hold his teaching position and discovers why so many of us would not live anywhere else, even if we do have to pay the taxes on our restaurant bills.

Chantal Hébert is a national affairs writer. Her column appears Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.