The Government/Press Connection

PRESS OFFICERS AND THEIR OFFICES

Stephen Hess

Newswork 2

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STEPHEN HESS

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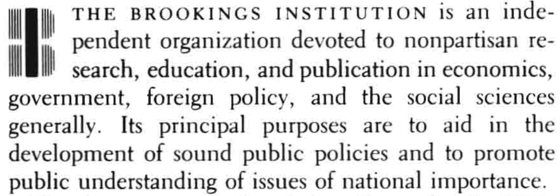

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Foreword

In a previous study (*The Washington Reporters*, Brookings Institution, 1981) Stephen Hess, a senior fellow in the Brookings Governmental Studies program, provided a perspective on the journalists who cover the U.S. government for the American commercial news media. In this new volume he turns his attention to the personnel and operations of government press offices. The study is based on a year Hess spent as an observer at the White House, State Department, Department of Defense, Department of Transportation, and Food and Drug Administration.

The Government/Press Connection can be appreciated on a number of levels: as a public administration study of a government function that has received scant attention from scholars; as a new interpretation of the utility of leaks for intragovernmental communication; and as a series of shrewd insights into common occurrences and practices that we tend to take for granted, including government briefings, handouts, and even the press clippings that circulate in a government agency. Readers will probably be most interested, however, in the evaluation of the degree to which government press operations may or may not manipulate public opinion. Hess differs with the conventional wisdom. He finds little evidence that press offices are propaganda machines distorting the nation's public dialogue. Others, of course, may draw different conclusions from the material he presents.

For the opportunity to have been an inside observer, the author wishes to thank David R. Gergen and Larry M. Speakes, White House; Dean E. Fischer and Alan Romberg, State Department; Henry E. Catto, Jr., Department of Defense; Linda J. Gosden, Department of Transportation; and Wayne L. Pines, Food and Drug Administration.

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BRUCE K. MACLAURY
President

July 1984
Washington, D.C.

Author's Note

THE OBSERVATIONS in this study are primarily based on an outsider's year inside the press offices of five federal agencies in Washington, first at the Food and Drug Administration, then at the Pentagon, the Department of Transportation, the State Department, and the White House. I spent from one month to three months at each place.

Starting in September, 1981, my days were devoted to following press officers as they went about their business. I listened to them talk on the phone, asked them to explain the calls they were making or receiving, attended their staff meetings, and accompanied them to press conferences, briefings, hearings, and to lunch. I read the contents of their "in" boxes and office files. When there were pressrooms at the agencies, I observed and interviewed the reporters, attempting to see the press officers through their eyes. I also talked with other government officials about them.

The technique of site observation has an honorable tradition in the social sciences, particularly in cultural anthropology, and as my colleague Herbert Kaufman points out, "The benefits of this mode of research have recently been winning renewed favor among students of organizations."[1] Moreover, it has been successfully used by two creative students of news processing, Edward Jay Epstein and Herbert J. Gans, who were allowed inside news organizations.[2] Still, when I began this project I wondered whether disseminating news, the work of press offices, was too sensitive in political terms to be studied effectively in this way. Would press officers, for example, discuss among themselves what not to tell reporters when there was an outsider present? In some cases permission to be an observer may have been granted to me because of prior personal or political contacts—I served on White House staffs in 1958–61 and in 1969. But after this initial foot in the door, I found that workers seemed to go about their business and to speak freely, probably because I hung around long enough and conducted myself in a nonthreatening manner. In short, the technique seemed valid.

To the best of my knowledge, the only meetings I was excluded from were supervisors' evaluations of the merits of particular workers. At several agencies I was required to get security clearances, which may have contributed to my bona fides: in a sense the government had officially certified me as trustworthy. Indeed, as I was to discover at times, one of my tougher tasks was to keep from being drawn into the activities I was there to observe. An observer does not advise, even when advice is solicited. I was also lucky. It was obviously mandatory that I not carry messages back and forth between officials and reporters, and my luck was that there were no leaks I could have been blamed for.

Generally I took notes only in meetings in which everyone was taking notes or in interviews where it was clearly expected of me. But each night, with the day's impressions fresh in mind, I wrote a log of what I had seen and heard and what I thought it all meant. When my entries became repetitious, I concluded I had probably absorbed all that I was capable of and that it was time to move to another agency.

I made no commitments to limit what I would write about other than a promise to show the draft manuscript to key officials who could then try to convince me of my mistakes. I offered no confidentiality, and only one person requested that our conversations be put on background, meaning that I could use his statements only if they were not attributed to him. Where I have not identified participants by name it is because I preferred to describe them by what they did or because I felt I had gathered information by eavesdropping on people with whom I had not established ground rules.

Because most of the executive branch information that relates to America's place in the world is funneled through the White House and the Departments of State and Defense, three agencies that I elsewhere call "the golden triangle,"[3] I naturally chose to observe their press offices. But I also wanted to go to agencies whose activities are seldom reported on front pages or by television networks unless there is something like a ban on saccharin or an air controller's strike. As parts of this outer ring of government, the Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Transportation were repeatedly recommended to me by reporters and officials for having good press operations. These choices were felicitous because I found that when people are proud of their skills, they are most willing to have a stranger look over their shoulders. I did not seek out agencies with a reputation for inefficiency or a history of scandal: the purpose of my study was to learn about a special type of government function, not to award performance ratings in a sort of Michelin guide to Washington press offices. Then too, I

sought observation points at different levels of government. The view at the Department of Transportation was from a cabinet member's perspective; the view at the Food and Drug Administration was through the other end of the telescope in that the agency is three managerial layers and twenty miles removed from the Office of the Secretary of Health and Human Services.

In some ways my observations were necessarily limited. A year spent wandering around government press offices does not allow an observer to compare the styles of successive administrations—and as Rush Taylor, director of news operations at the State Department, pointed out to me, "the differences in press relations from one administration to another can be staggering."* Nor can one year enable observations of changes caused by the length of time an administration has been in office: first years and fourth years have very different looks, as Michael Grossman and Martha Kumar suggest in their cyclical theory of relations between reporters and presidents.[4] On the other hand, the timing of this project did ease my access to press offices and probably was conducive to the candor of press officers: the project came early enough in the life of the Reagan administration that the president and his appointees still held relatively benign attitudes toward outsiders.

My observations were also probably influenced by common variables that affect government relations with reporters. The season of the year makes a difference; for instance, January—just before the president sends the budget to Congress—is the leakiest month in Washington, and tension between the government and the press can be expected to increase. Not surprisingly, it was in January 1982 that the White House tried to crack down on officials' contacts with the press and in January 1983 that President Reagan complained he had "had it up to [his] keister with these leaks."[5] Personalities also make a difference. A veteran Pentagon reporter described Caspar Weinberger as a "mouthy secretary" who talked so frequently on the record that he had become a "drug on the market." To prove the point, he held up a morning newspaper in which the defense chief's appearance on a Sunday television program was only the third lead. Across the Potomac in Foggy Bottom a veteran diplomatic reporter talked about Alexander Haig as a secretary of state whose contempt for the press was so palpable that he had not even bothered to master the difference between "off the record" and "on background."[6] Reporters further contend that the relative merits of press secretaries make a difference. Television network correspondent Barrie Dunsmore fondly remembered Secretary of State Cyrus Vance's spokesman, Hodding Carter:

* All persons are identified by the title they had at the time I interviewed or observed them.

"Sometimes you called him with a little question and you got a big answer."

To arrive at generalizations, therefore, I have tested my observations through interviews with reporters and civil servants whose experiences span more than one presidency and interviews with press spokesmen from previous administrations. The study reflects comments from press officers under five secretaries of state and five secretaries of defense. Of course, memories will play wondrous tricks, and some participants will feel the need to defend and perhaps retrospectively correct the historical record. But I hope that this mix of past experiences and present observations will provide a basis of valid impressions that other researchers will be able to confirm by more systematic means.

S.H.

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CHAPTER 1

Carping Journalists and Incompetent Press Officers

THE DEVELOPMENT of government press offices is a twentieth-century phenomenon, dating back to Woodrow Wilson's creation of the Committee on Public Information during World War I. The committee was a sort of ministry of propaganda whose news division churned out an average of more than ten releases a day.

Before the turn of the century there was little need for formal links between journalists and officials. After all, in 1888, when there were 38 states in the union and 330 members of the House of Representatives, the *Congressional Directory* shows that the entire official Washington press corps consisted of 127 reporters. Even the White House was not a regular beat until 1896 when William Price, a reporter for the *Washington Star*, stationed himself outside the building to interview Grover Cleveland's visitors. Price's initiative inspired imitators. On a winter day in 1902, Theodore Roosevelt saw reporters huddled around the north portico and invited them inside. Later that year he had a pressroom built in the new west wing which, George Juergens notes in his history of the relationship between president and press during the Progressive Era, "conferred a sort of legitimacy on their presence. . . . They were no longer there just as guests of the president."[1]

Wilson was the first chief executive to hold regular press conferences, starting when 125 reporters crowded into the East Room on a Saturday afternoon in March 1913. And although Herbert Hoover would be the first president to have an assistant with the title of press secretary, Joseph Tumulty of Wilson's staff performed this role, briefing about 30 reporters from the major news organizations each morning at ten.

Pressroom, press conference, press secretary, press office, press release:

the development of government mechanisms to service the news media was a product of mutual advantage, not a constitutional responsibility of the Republic. Activist presidents and expansionist newspapers occurred at the same time and needed each other.[2] With a new vision of America's significance in the world, Teddy Roosevelt flexed the nation's muscles, sending the fleet around the world, dispatching the Marines to the Dominican Republic, and digging the Panama Canal. Washington was becoming exciting news. And The Hero of San Juan Hill, the trustbuster, the activist president personified, also wanted to be news, and was. Certainly never before, and debatably never since, has there been a president so made for headline writers and political cartoonists. "He really believes he is the American flag," said author John Jay Chapman.[3]

Meanwhile publishers, the Joseph Pulitzers and William Randolph Hearsts, were becoming the impressarios of a technology that featured Linotype and high-speed presses. The speed and printing capability enabled them to reach a truly mass market, one that advertisers paid handsomely to court. Newspaper readership doubled in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and almost tripled by the time Roosevelt left his "bully pulpit" in 1909.[4]

The story from Washington became infinitely more complicated and even more important after the whirlwind that was Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal. As Leo C. Rosten wrote in his study of Washington reporters in the 1930s, "Within a few weeks after Mr. Roosevelt took office . . . [reporters] discovered that they were expected to write about the gold standard and the devaluation of the dollar, the reconstruction of industrial relations under NRA, a farm program, collective bargaining, public works, relief measures, national resources, and national planning. . . . The American public began to devour a *kind* of news with which most newspapermen had not been trained to cope."[5] The press corps grew because government grew. Government press operations grew because the press corps grew. Both grew because of increased complexities. Government took on more complicated questions that needed more explanation.[6] Government workers were increasingly technologists, and their work and speech needed to be translated for journalists.[7] At the same time, the news media became more technologically complicated, which meant that government officials would have to understand their special needs and limitations. Thus specialized government press officers were added both to service the media and to explain them to other government workers.

By 1980 the U.S. Office of Personnel Management reported that there were 2,900 federal public information specialists (GS-1081), another 2,178

writer-editors (GS-1082), and others who performed information functions regardless of their job descriptions.[8] These numbers, however, hardly justify claims that government is spending "at least $1 billion a year to inform and sell the American people" or "at least 2.5 billion dollars annually."[9] Such estimates are inflated; they include all advertising (military recruiting, stamp collecting, train riding), filmmaking, publications, and sometimes even the costs of the armed forces bands and precision flying units like the Blue Angels.[10] The subjects of this study—press offices—are actually very small operations by government standards. The State Department in Washington, for example, had 42 full-time public affairs advisers as of March 30, 1982. The Food and Drug Administration employs over 7,600 people, 9 of whom are press officers. Very few government buildings have pressrooms, and most government press officers have duties in addition to servicing reporters.

As GOVERNMENT grows more important in our lives, the press also becomes more important. It is the vehicle through which we learn about government, so much so that Harvard political scientist Gary R. Orren suggests, "Will Rogers' famous quip about only knowing what he read in the papers seems to have been more prophetic than satirical." The quality and quantity of what government chooses to say about what it is doing are hardly inconsequential in a democracy. Intuitively, then, we think there is something very important about the relationship between government and the press, although, in fact, we know very little about this connection.

What has often been asserted about that connection over the past two decades is disturbing and adds urgency to our need to know more. "The government—the elected officials, the appointed executives, the various bureaucracies and bureaucrats—puts out only the information it wants to put out," says a report of the American Civil Liberties Union. "Through its vast network of public information offices, the government affirmatively broadcasts its side of the story, leaving out facts that might cloud the picture it wants to present. . . . Over the years, officials of the governments, particularly the federal government, have become as adept at playing this game as they are at drawing up yearly budgets. They play with a cynicism that suggests a good measure of contempt for the public."[11] Others write of government "flacks" who try to control the press, of government's "instinct" to manage and manipulate information, or of a "shadowy" government public relations machine that specializes in misinformation.[12] No wonder that Roger Rosenblatt of *Time* writes of "yet another smooth-voiced press officer," meaning not some special individual with a name, but rather an

image akin to the nineteenth-century seller of snake oil.[13] Indeed, it is hard to find a discussion of modern government's relations with the press that does not include the words *manage, manipulate,* and *control.*

Yet there is a certain paradox to this emphasis on manipulation because another comment often made about government press officers is that they are not very good at their jobs. The *National Journal*'s Dom Bonafede even found a government information specialist who said that federal public affairs officials are "pretty poor in general,"[14] and a newspaper article about a conscientious press officer describes her as atypical.[15] Marianne Means, of Hearst's Washington bureau, began a 1981 column, "President Reagan seems to be having trouble finding all that fraud and waste he promised to eliminate, so I've got a suggestion for him. He should wipe out all the so-called information specialists in the federal government. Nobody, including journalists, would miss them."[16]

The twin complaints seem to add up to an indictment of government press officers as incompetent manipulators.

But most of the comments about public information and its dispensers have one thing in common: they come from people who are or have been journalists. They also come from two schools of writing, Outrage and Anecdote. The former is primarily a product of the years spanning Vietnam and Watergate; the latter is represented by memoirs of various reporters who have covered Washington beats.[17] The first group of writers seems to start with the premise that government is corrupt or wrong (which is why it has so much to hide), while the other writers are more interested in telling amusing stories than in generalizing from their experiences. The outrage may be justified and the anecdotes may be accurate; we shall see. But journalists are hardly disinterested observers when the subject is government information policy and practices. Occasionally they have the good grace, as had William J. Small, to add: "I apologize to my friends in government for this book won't make them look good. I await their books to tell me all that's wrong with the press."[18] But except for former White House press secretaries, government information officers seldom write books from their perspective, and when they do, they mostly focus on crisis.[19]

The concept that "where you stand depends on where you sit"—known to public administrators as Miles's Law—is also germane to this controversy.[20] As a CBS correspondent, Edward R. Murrow narrated a television documentary that, when he became director of the U.S. Information Agency, he asked the British Broadcasting Corporation not to show.[21] Bill Moyers, when he was President Johnson's spokesman, said the press "generally tends to

write its opinion of a matter and then seeks out facts for it." When he became a CBS correspondent, he narrated a TV documentary that President Reagan's spokesman said was "not fair" and "below the belt."[22]

Most writing about the government/press connection has also been limited in that scholars and journalists have overwhelmingly concentrated on the White House and election campaigns.[23] Those political scientists whose writings are most sensitive to the interplay between government and the news media have tended to be presidentialists.[24] In daily reportage from Washington, when there are stories about press relations, the emphasis is largely on the president: "This week, Reagan botched several questions at his news conference . . ." or "The television tube is this president's most potent weapon, as he proved again this week. . . ."[25]

What such exclusive focus means, of course, is that the remainder of the government/press connection is left underexplored. Indeed, the best volume on nonpresidential government press operations is a self-styled "guidebook for the practitioner,"[26] and the most frequently cited scholarly book on press relations in government agencies is a 1961 survey that interviewed thirty-eight public information officers and thirty-five newsmen.[27] Yet quantitatively, at least, most of the information that reaches the public through the news media comes from what Leon V. Sigal calls "routine channels." In his study on the organization and politics of newsmaking, Sigal analyzes 2,850 stories that had appeared in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* and concludes that press officers or their routine news releases and briefings outnumber "enterprise channels" such as leaks by well over two to one.[28] Sigal looks at output—what appears in the press. In a previous study I looked at input—what reporters do to get their stories. We reached the same conclusions about the sources of news. Washington reporters covering national government, I found, contact press officers on almost half their stories.[29]

The press offices are what Don Oberdorfer of the *Washington Post* calls "the junction point where the government and the press meet." They are not the only junction points, of course.[30] But, Oberdorfer adds, "surely the guts of what passes across the news wires from Washington come from [press office] transactions. For most reporters, it's what it's all about—the clips, the releases, the briefings—and yet nobody ever studies that stuff."

This is the second volume in my Newswork series, which is based on the assumption that the press is a public policy institution and deserves the same kind of attention that has been paid to the presidency, judiciary, and legislature. The first book asked questions about the Washington reporters. Similar questions are now asked about the Washington press offices and

officers: How do they organize their work and what are their relations within their organizations? Who are they? What do they do and how well do they do it? Although the methodologies of the *The Washington Reporters* (1981) and *The Government/Press Connection* are entirely different, they do suggest mirror images. One focuses on news gatherers, the other on information disseminators. Together, and with future studies, including one presently in the research stage on the Senate and the news media, they are meant to map the uncharted terrain where the press fits into the governmental process.

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