

Reporting Public Affairs

Pro. and Solutions
Ronal evell

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REPORTING PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Problems and Solutions

Ronald P. Lovell





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Preface

Public affairs now dominate the lives of citizens of this country to a greater and greater extent. From local events like tax increases or changes in school curriculum to national events like Supreme Court decisions or advances in science and medicine, the public has to understand and cope with many things that were unknown even ten years ago.

The subjects included in public affairs are often confusing and complicated. The people working in the various areas—mayors, governors, politicians, educators, lawyers, judges, businessmen, doctors, and scientists—often want it that way. They use big words and the jargon of their trades freely, sometimes merely because they know them, but often because it gives them a dominance over those who aren't as knowledgeable. The poor citizen is left groping for the meaning of it all.

Conveying that meaning is the job of a new kind of journalist—the public affairs reporter. The purpose of this book is to help that reporter to understand public affairs subject areas well enough to aid and educate

the average reader.

Public affairs reporting has elements that are no different from any kind of reporting. A reporter gets an assignment, interviews sources and observes events, and returns to the office and writes a story with a lead and a body. But public affairs reporting has other elements, however, that are vastly different from general news. The subjects are complicated, and they include special problems in coverage not found on the usual beats.

Sometimes the problems are those of language. Sometimes the sources are hard to understand. Other times it is the process that is difficult to grasp. Whatever the problem, this book has been written to anticipate it and suggest ways to deal with it. The book will accomplish its purpose in

several ways: 1. by introducing real public affairs reporters from large and small newspapers, a magazine, and a wire service who discuss the excitements and frustrations of doing their jobs; 2. by outlining the background of a particular field; 3. by presenting current problems of coverage and typical kinds of stories; 4. by analyzing the writing of reporters.

Each chapter will end with a list of likely problems found on a particular beat and suggestions on how to solve them. To prepare future public affairs reporters to understand the various subject areas, the book also contains a number of boxes that explain how an important element of a beat works: how city, county, and state governments operate; how the economy works; how a suspect goes through the judicial process; and what the ecological cycle is. Lists of key terms and several flowcharts add

to this understanding.

A secondary aim of the book is to offer readers the "feel" for public affairs reporting. What is it like to report about the damaged reactor at Three Mile Island, cover a state legislature, or unearth a scandal that will ultimately drive a county commissioner from office? What are the problems of interviewing scientists and businessmen? How can a reporter stay out of legal trouble in covering a trial? The opening segments of each chapter and the sprinkling of comments by reporters elsewhere answer many of these questions and make readers feel as if they were with the reporter.

Part I gives a background to public affairs reporting. Part II (Politics and Government) contains chapters on politics and elections, state government, local government, education, and investigative reporting. Part III (Law) covers police and courts in separate chapters. Part IV (Science and Medicine) has chapters on science, environment, and medicine and health. Part V (Business) includes a chapter on business and finance. Appendices on legal problems, ethical problems, and methods of search-

ing public records end the book.

A number of topics do not rate their own chapters in the book, primarily because not as many publications employ people to write about them. Energy is sometimes part of the business beat or is done on a part-time basis by a science or environment reporter. Consumer affairs is a relatively new area—part business writing and part a combination of crusading and fraud detection. Urban affairs touches other beats, especially government and police. Land-use planning is a new and important field, but it is not widespread enough to rate a corps of specialists to report about it. Although labor is an old staple of public affairs reporting books, coverage of it has declined greatly in the past decade. The book covers all of these subjects in boxes in the chapters to which they are most closely allied.

Although I have not worked as a reporter in every area included in the book, I have been a business reporter (for *Business Week*), a medical writer (for *Medical World News*), a science correspondent (for McGraw-

Hill World News), and a small-town government reporter (as editor of my own weekly newspaper). My comments, then, are not based on academic experience alone. I have faced some of the same problems that the reporters included in these pages encountered.

I have two hopes for the readers of this book, the public affairs reporters of tomorrow: that they discover enough about such reporting to make them want to enter its ranks and that they gain sufficient informa-

tion to do well once they are on the job.

I could not have completed Reporting Public Affairs: Problems and Solutions without the help of a great many people. First and foremost I want to thank the reporters and editors who allowed me to pick their brains: Jerald terHorst, Bill Boyarsky, Bob Goldstein, Jerry Uhrhammer, Linda Kramer, Neal Hirschfeld, Bob Rawitch, John Noble Wilford, Casey Bukro, Bill Ingram, and Gordon McKibben. I wish also to thank Jill Carroll, Frank Del Olmo, Linda Hosek, Kevin Miller, and Al Tannenbaum for useful background information. I am grateful to the following news organizations for permission to reprint stories: the Detroit News, the Bellevue Journal-American, the Eugene Register-Guard, the Associated Press, the New York Daily News, the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, the Chicago Tribune, Medical World News, the Boston Globe, the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, and the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology.

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As the circle for these salutations narrows, I leave three people who helped greatly: my typist, Glenda Monroe; my copy editor, Verna Lovell; and my faithful editor and friend, Rebecca Hayden.

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I. BACKGROUND

The first and great commandment is, "Don't let them scare you."

—Flmer Davis

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1 Background to Public Affairs Reporting

The press is no substitute for institutions. It is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision. Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episodes, incidents, and eruptions. It is only when they work by a steady light of their own, that the press, when it is turned upon them, reveals a situation intelligible enough for a popular decision.

-Walter Lippmann, Public Opinion

A definition
Meager beginnings
Basic requirements
Writing public affairs stories

A DEFINITION

At least on the surface public affairs reporting sounds like the coverage of governmental organizations. It is that, of course, as the chapters in this book on state and local governments, budgets and records, education, police, courts, and politics and elections will prove. But it encompasses other areas as well. Citizens today are faced with concerns that go beyond mere governmental bodies. These other fields and the problems