



# A Special Report

## Western Lawmakers Meet The Media

**Robert Erickson**

**I**s statehouse media coverage adequate? Accurate? Are the media out to get state legislators? Do lawmakers themselves contribute to negative news images? What do journalists and legislators owe the public?

When Western legislators met in Lake Tahoe in July 2002 at the CSG-*WEST* Annual Meeting, lawmakers filled the room to debate these questions with a panel of journalists convened by the Committee on the Future of Western Legislatures. Idaho Senator Bart Davis chaired the forum, and Alaska Representative Eric Croft served as vice chair.

Sitting on the panel were: Charles Layton, writer and contributor to the Project on the State of the American Newspaper; Vic Biondi, media consultant and former political reporter for KCRA TV Sacramento and KNBC TV Los Angeles; Mike O'Callaghan, Las Vegas Sun editor and former governor of Nevada; Fred Brown, recently retired Denver Post reporter; and Joan Cartan-Hansen, Idaho public TV producer.



*Idaho Sen. Bart Davis summarizes a USA Today survey where neither journalists nor government officials captured the public's trust.*

Senator Davis opened the popular forum by reading from a recent USA Today survey that ranked the level of public trust for various professions. Teachers, small business owners, military personnel and police officers topped the survey. Journalists and government officials, however, were far down on the list of people trusted by the public.

Short video clips from around the West then depicted some of the "dos" and "don'ts" for legislators when they are under media scrutiny.

**Is statehouse coverage adequate?  
Is it accurate?**

American Journalism Review writer Layton described the findings from his work for the Project on the State of the American Newspaper. These findings show a steady decline over recent years in the number of newspaper reporters assigned to cover statehouses and legislative proceedings. In 1998, the number of reporters covering statehouses dropped to half of the number from just a decade earlier. This trend still continues with another five percent drop in such reporters between 2000 and 2002.

Layton noted that this decline in statehouse reporting took place even as the courts and the federal government shifted more power to the states. He pointed out that the amount of space available in newspapers for state government news has been declining as well.

Among the various reasons for the decline in statehouse coverage is the fact that national newspaper chains own

***The Council of State Governments-WEST (CSG-WEST) provides a nonpartisan platform for regional cooperation and collaboration among the legislatures of the 13 Western states by creating opportunities for legislators and staff to share ideas and experiences with their colleagues. This publication is one of several Special Reports that summarize policy forums convened at the 2002 CSG-WEST Annual Meeting hosted by the Nevada Legislature.***

many local papers. Local papers often get significant pressure from their parent companies to cut expenses, which can translate into less coverage at state capitols.

Veteran news consultant **Biondi** offered lawmakers his perspective based on many years spent in the broadcast industry. He said television research from 25 years ago showed that the public really is not interested in statehouse activities. On the question of adequacy of coverage, Biondi believes that the public probably is satisfied with the status quo.

Biondi told lawmakers that public television is working very hard to provide information on government to its viewers. In contrast, he noted that the last full-time commercial television crew covering statehouse activities in Sacramento left 18 years ago. That station (KNBC-TV) decided that full-time coverage in Sacramento cost too much money. By closing down its Sacramento bureau, the station was able to purchase a helicopter and another camera for its news coverage in Southern California.

Biondi reminded legislators that TV reporters assigned to cover a hearing or story in the capitol by necessity may be poorly informed

about the topic. Legislators should take the time to educate TV reporters.

<b>Statehouse Coverage in West:</b>		
Up, Down or Unchanged?		
2000-2002		
<b>AK</b> +	<b>AZ</b> -	<b>CA</b> -
<b>CO</b> -	<b>HI</b> +	<b>ID</b> -
<b>MT</b> =	<b>NV</b> -	<b>NM</b> =
<b>OR</b> -	<b>UT</b> -	<b>WA</b> -
<b>WY</b> =		

\* + Shows increased coverage, - shows a decline and = shows no change.

Source: Excerpts from "The State of the American Newspaper," American Journalism Review, June 2002. Researchers surveyed how many newspaper reporters covered 50 state capitols in 2002 as compared to 2000. Nine states saw increases in the number of statehouse reporters, 31 states lost capitol reporters and 10 states kept the same number. In the West, the majority of states lost capitol reporters.

During the discussion of statehouse news coverage, panel members advised lawmakers to be proactive when seeking press coverage. Journalists recommended contacting news directors at TV stations and newspaper reporters with whom you've already established a good working relationship. Legislators, said

media experts, often can gain support for an important piece of legislation by meeting in advance with newspaper editorial boards.



California broadcast consultant Vic Biondi gives Western legislators a TV reporter's perspective on statehouse news coverage.

### Are the media out to get state legislators?

Former **Governor O'Callaghan** tackled this question from his unique perspective as someone who has served in government and also written commentary about it. The Las Vegas Sun editor told legislators that he was unaware of any capitol press members who have a personal agenda other than to tell their readers and viewers what is happening and why. Reporters are not sent to the capitol to make elected officials either happy or unhappy. Instead they are to serve as the eyes and ears of the people.

O’Callaghan acknowledged that voters get their impressions of the legislature from editorials and political commentary on bills rather than from individual legislators. He said most public criticism is leveled at the legislature as a body, and not at its individual members.

In the discussion about “gotcha” journalism, a number of Western lawmakers offered personal examples of unfair treatment they received from the media. Others advised colleagues not to argue with those who buy ink by the barrel, but to persist in the pursuit of positive coverage.

Public TV producer **Cartan-Hansen** summarized an informal survey she conducted prior to the forum. She asked fellow members of the Association of Capitol Reporters and Editors: “Is the media out to get lawmakers?” Capitol reporters said “no,” but offered the following advice to legislators.

### **Informal rules of the road from statehouse reporters**

1. *It’s not your story. It’s the reporter’s and later the editor’s.*
2. *Do not expect reporters to ask your opinion on everything just because you represent the people in the circulation area of the paper.*
3. *Do not get mad if a reporter interviews you but doesn’t use your quotes.*
4. *Do not expect the reporter to “clean up” your quotes.*
5. *Clarify in advance with the reporter what is background information versus what can be quoted.*
6. *Understand the critical deadlines of the reporter.*
7. *Behave!*

*Source: Informal survey of members of the Association of Capitol Reporters and Editors, Summer 2002*

### **Have legislators contributed to negative news images?**

**Fred Brown**, former statehouse reporter for The Denver Post, affirmed that capitol reporters do like to look for examples of misbehavior by legislators. The press may not pay much attention to a particular legislator unless that person happens to do something “dumb.” Brown shared his personal “*ten commandments on how to avoid bad press.*”

### **Ten commandments on how to avoid bad press**

1. *Live in your district.*
2. *Never lie to a reporter.*
3. *Obey the laws you write.*
4. *Do not miss many votes.*
5. *Do not have open conversations on how vacations are more important than voting.*
6. *Do not vacation with lobbyists.*
7. *Watch how your employees are spending the taxpayers’ money.*
8. *Do not put your friends and family on the payroll.*
9. *Audit the books more than once every 14 years.*
10. *Make your records open and available to the public.*

*Source: Fred Brown, veteran statehouse reporter, The Denver Post.*

Brown acknowledged that journalists as well as lawmakers must abide by certain standards, in particular reporting the truth and treating those covered with respect. He said that the Society of Professional Journalists adopted a voluntary code of ethics in 1996. To view the SPJ code, go to [http://www.spj.org/ethics\\_code.asp](http://www.spj.org/ethics_code.asp)

## What are the mutual responsibilities of lawmakers and the media?

Cartan-Hansen led this discussion. She said that the basic goals of elected officials and journalists are the same—to make their communities, state, or world a better place. Both lawmakers and members of the media, she believes, must “do our jobs the best we can and be there to listen to each other and react to each other.”

Commercial broadcast consultant Biondi said that it is in the best interests of everyone if a healthy degree of skepticism remains between legislators and the media. Print media expert Layton advised legislators to be conscientious and to practice straight talking. Las Vegas Sun editor O’Callaghan reiterated his advice to work hard and be honest with the press.

Former Denver Post reporter Brown summed up the sentiments of fellow panelists. If lawmakers provide the straight story, they need not fear reporters, concluded Brown.



*Las Vegas Sun editor Mike O’Callaghan, Denver Post reporter Fred Brown and Idaho public TV producer Joan Cartan-Hansen offer advice to legislators who want to improve media relations.*

*Robert Erickson directs the Research Division of the Nevada Legislative Counsel Bureau.*

**At the end of this report from CSG-WEST’s Committee on the Future of Western Legislatures, we have added tips from other meetings and other sources that we hope will be useful to legislators as they strive to improve media relations.**

### Rocky Relations:

*Sample Headlines from Newspapers in the West, June 2002*

Candidates Wipe Off Mud as Polls Open  
Albuquerque Journal (NM), June 4, 2002

Partisanship Marks Special Session  
Statesman Journal (OR), June 12, 2002

In Deep Hole, At Least Idaho Legislators Do No Harm  
Lewiston Morning Tribune (ID), June 12, 2002

Good and Bad News: Legislature Didn’t Do Too Much  
Tucson Citizen (AZ), June 7, 2002

Journalist Accused of Bias by GOP  
The Daily Camera (CO), June 4, 2002



# Learning to handle the media

BY ALAN ROSENTHAL

Whenever two or more legislators get together, their conversation often turns to the media. When a few hundred legislators got together at the CSG-WEST Annual Meeting in Lake Tahoe, a three-hour session focused on legislator-press relations. Five panelists, all journalists, offered their perspectives to the assembled legislators.

The journalists had a tough audience. Few legislators are complimentary about the media. For those legislators attending CSG-WEST, the session afforded them an opportunity to express their displeasure with their treatment by the media.

During the time set aside for discussion, a number of legislators told how they had been "beaten up" by "gotcha journalism." A Utah veteran told how a reporter had misrepresented him. One panelist, Mike O'Callaghan, executive editor of the *Las Vegas Sun* and former governor of Nevada, asked the legislator if he managed to win re-election after such misrepresentation. The legislator had. In defense of the press, O'Callaghan said, "No single story is going to beat a good legislator."

While mischief to individuals is serious, the damage done to the legislature as an institution is grave. The session at CSG-WEST did not address institutional harm directly, but it did cast light on the nature of the legislatures' problems with the press.

Charles Layton, a contributor to the *American Journalism Review*, reminded the audience that the press is a competitive business that needs readers and viewers to survive. There is little interest by editors in and less newspaper space for state news. Moreover, with newsroom budget cuts, fewer full-time reporters are covering legislatures in state capitals. Newspapers are now learning what television learned 25 years ago. According to Vic Biondi, broadcast media consultant, people just aren't interested in government. So, commercial television no longer covers the statehouse — except for parachuting in occasionally for some more sensational story.

How, then, does the press appeal to people who aren't interested in news about state government or the state legislature? Obviously, the press has to make the news entertaining. One way, according to panelist Fred Brown, former statehouse reporter for the *Denver Post*, is to per-

sonalize the news. Instead of covering dull committee meetings and wordy deliberations, statehouse reporters will take an "ordinary person," anecdotal approach. Another way is to emphasize the negative. Political scientist Thomas Patterson has found that negativity in the news has been on the rise since the 1960s. So, while statehouse coverage is on the decline, negatives are on the increase.

Nothing emphasizes the negative more than investigative reporting, which has been ascendant since Watergate. For editors and reporters, legislators are fair game; they are big game. "We want to look for misbehavior on the part of legislators," said veteran reporter Brown, "even though it isn't misbehavior at all." But, as the journalistic saying goes, "If it bleeds, it leads." In other words, a good story for a reporter is a bad story for the legislature.

Reporters express admiration for certain individual legislators, but they are cynical about the legislature, the legislative process and the overall system. According to O'Callaghan, "Reportorial displeasure is directed at the legislature — not the legislator." Journalists question the legitimacy of all institutions, especially political ones. And they are suspicious of anything they can't see, points out panelist Layton. There is much that they can't see, because the legislative process is not visible to a single eye. It does not take place only in committee, in caucus or on the floor. It is going on everywhere — inside and outside the capitol building. If reporters cannot see it, they conclude that legislators are up to "no good" and are acting adversely to the public interest.

No single story inflicts damage on the institution. It is the succession of negative, cynical and simplistic stories that takes a toll on the legislature. The issue, therefore, is not how adroitly individual legislators manage their relations with the media. It is how individual legislators can bypass the press to explain their institution to the public and help rebuild public support for the legislature.

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— Alan Rosenthal is a professor with the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University.



**"No single story is going to beat a good legislator."**

# How to Work with the News Media

Rebecca LaVally and Jeff Raimundo

## **Boiled down to its essence, there tend to be two kinds of media experiences:**

- Offensive or proactive: You work with the media to get your story out.
- Defensive or reactive: The media comes to you with a potentially damaging story for your comment or reaction.

## **There are “rules” for effectively dealing with the media in both situations.**

All reporters know the rules, or think they do. They learned the lingo in journalism school. You didn't go to J school. You also need to understand the rules and lingo, though.

The first rule is that the rules must be established first, before the conversation begins, as soon as the reporter has identified himself or herself as a reporter. *Be sure both sides understand exactly what the words – such as “not for attribution” – mean. Even though they went to J school, sometimes reporters aren't quite sure what the terms mean, either.*

- **Off the record** (*nothing in the conversation may be used by the reporter*),
- **Not for attribution** (*the material may be used verbatim but the source cannot be identified*),
- **Background** (*the information can be worked into the story but not attributed to a source*),
- **Deep background** (*the information is for the reporter's own understanding and cannot appear in the story*).

*Nothing that has been said to a reporter, before the rules were agreed upon, can be unsaid and the reporter is free to use it. If you give a reporter a document, then change your mind, don't expect to get the document back. If you want to release an embargoed document, it is best to first make sure the reporter agrees to your embargo.*

## **Tips**

Most reporters want to quote *elected* officials – and their editors expect them to. They typically use staff as information sources. This works for reporters by giving them a source for checking their facts and interpretation of events so they can get their stories right. Their reputations hinge on being accurate, and they typically work under tremendous pressure, so as a matter of necessity they look for shortcuts that work for them.

Most reporters will appreciate your time in giving them information or background that helps them write their stories accurately. They don't want to burn you, because they'll want your help again. But sometimes they burn you anyway. *So establish the rules first, be articulate and say nothing you'll regret.*

It makes sense to get to know reporters who cover your areas of expertise. Why? Because you may need their help someday in getting your story (or your boss's story) out. To establish a working relationship, try calling or e-mailing a reporter with a compliment on a recent story and a tip for another story. When you come across background material that you think they'll find interesting, send it to them.

## **Advantages of working with the media**

- Reporters are people. If they like you, or like working with you, they'll be more receptive to your message.
- In a public-policy world, momentum helps make things happen — and news stories and editorials help build public momentum.
- Having your work cited in the media can lend credibility to your office.

## **Disadvantages of working with the media**

You have no direct control over the final product. It may be less than flattering. The media has a negative bias.

## **How to overcome the media's negative bias**

Understand that reporters and editors typically feel they have an obligation to inform their readers and listeners, and a civic duty to cover important stories. If you can convince a reporter your story is important, and interesting, you've got a chance at having your message heard. Reporters who cover beats such as health care, education and environmental issues are by definition interested in developments in their fields.

Despite perceptions, most beat reporters typically spend more time covering ongoing developments than they do digging up wrongdoing and performing other investigative journalism. They simply don't have the luxury of taking on such time-consuming and possibly fruitless tasks given pressures to produce stories.

## **News releases, news conferences, leaks**

Don't bother writing a news release on a report, document or other development if it isn't truly newsworthy. It's a waste of time, and could harm your credibility as a source of newsworthy information. If it is newsworthy, make it short – a couple of pages – and lead with the most important information. Use pertinent quotes from policymakers and from the material you're releasing. A report or other document should be tightly written and include an executive summary that hits all the highlights. For complicated material, a Q&A backgrounder can be a useful tool.

The danger of holding a news conference is that perhaps no one will come. If your boss truly has something important to unveil, you may want to consider a news conference. But it can be more effective to offer a beat reporter at a major newspaper an early and exclusive copy of the material. Be aware that this can anger other reporters, though. Sometimes it's effective to leak material that is circulating for a final peer review, when the document is essentially done and already vetted — and the leak could have come from any number of sources. Then, when the final document is officially released, you may get a round of catch-up stories.

Sometimes reporters simply aren't intrigued by public-policy material that is released to everyone at the same time. They want to impress their editors by covering something different from what everyone else has.

## **Other avenues**

- *Letters to the editor — If rebutting an editorial, don't repeat the editorial's negative points.*
- *Op-ed or Sunday forum pieces — Consider helping a third-party expert such as an academician put together a fact-based, research-oriented Sunday opinion piece under his or her byline that advances your point of view.*
- *Editorials – Offer to meet with an editorial writer whose specialty areas include your issue. Mail your policy publications to editorial editors.*

*Source: Presentation by Becky LaVally and Jeff Raimundo to the CSG-WEST Legislative Service Agency/Research Directors Committee, October 26, 2001. LaVally works for the California Senate Office of Research and formerly served as Sacramento bureau manager of the United Press International. Raimundo is a Sacramento public relations consultant and formerly worked as chief political writer for the Sacramento Bee and McClachy newspapers. These tips were written for staff, but also are useful for members.*

## Quick Tips to Get Better Press

### *Ten Keys to Success When Dealing with the News Media*

- 1) **Project a strong, credible image.** Speak firmly and look the reporter in the eyes.
- 2) **Never take a reporter's cold call.** Say you'll call back, then do so in time to meet news deadlines – but only after preparing your response.
- 3) **You can set the stage.** Your meeting place and the camera background are an important part of your message.
- 4) **Know your subject** – prepare talking points and discuss them with an associate.
- 5) **Stick to the script.** Don't let the reporter pull you off your message.
- 6) **Know your ultimate audience, and speak to it.** Never try to persuade the reporter. She is not your audience.
- 7) **Have something to say and say it positively.** Never repeat a reporter's negative question.
- 8) **Keep it short.** Sound bites and quotable quotes get results. Rambling speeches don't.
- 9) **Always tell the truth.** If you can't, don't attempt to answer the question.
- 10) **Remember, an interview is not over until you see their headlights fading in the distance.**

Source: Townsend, Raimundo, Besler and Usher public relations firm, Sacramento, CA.

### *What to do When a Reporter Calls*

- 1) Say you can't take the call immediately.
- 2) Determine the reporter's deadline and say you **will** call back before then.
- 3) Meet with an associate to develop your 3-4 talking points.
- 4) Write the talking points down on a 3x5 card and practice them.
- 5) Review the "Ten Keys to Success."
- 6) If you've agreed to a personal meeting, choose a location that reinforces your message. Think strategically.
- 7) When you return the call or meet with the reporter, **stick to your messages.**

Source: Townsend, Raimundo, Besler and Usher public relations firm, Sacramento, CA.



Roleplaying is one way lawmakers can prepare to handle media interviews.



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