

A RESPONSIBLE PRESS OFFICE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

[HANDBOOK SERIES]



[United States Department of State]

[Bureau of International Information Programs]

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**PRESS
OFFICE**
IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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A Responsible Press Office in the Digital Age

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U.S. State Dept./Jane Chun

Marguerite Hoxie Sullivan is a specialist in media relations. She has worked as a journalist, public affairs and communications specialist, and an executive in government and international nongovernmental organizations. Ms. Sullivan has done more than a hundred training sessions around the world on issues of effective communications. In addition to the present volume, she is the author of the first edition of the U.S. Department of State's *A Responsible Press Office: An Insider's Guide*,

which was translated into 30 languages and won a number of awards.

Ms. Sullivan launched and became senior director of the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) at the National Endowment for Democracy. CIMA promotes the indispensable role that good governance and independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies.

Ms. Sullivan began her career as a journalist working for newspapers in Boston and California before moving to Washington, where she was a reporter and columnist for a national news service covering Congress, and federal agencies and departments. She has served as president of the Washington Press Club (now the National Press Club), worked as executive editor of a women's magazine, and authored a number of publications.

Ms. Sullivan has held several positions in the U.S. government, including at the U.S. Department of State, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the White House, and served as a Cabinet member for a U.S. state governor. She was executive director of the U.S. National Commission for UNESCO, and was vice president for communications and external affairs for an NGO that works on democracy issues.

A native of California, Ms. Sullivan has a bachelor's degree in history and a master's degree in journalism from Stanford University. She has lectured at numerous universities and institutions, including the Smithsonian Institution, and was a fellow at the Institute of Politics at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. She has served on the U.S. National Council on the Humanities and the grant-making bureau for UNESCO's Programme for the Development of Communication.



President Obama watches the start of a press conference from the Lower Press Office of the White House. Press operations can be organized in many ways. *Official White House Photo by Pete Souza*



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Foreword

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I wrote *A Responsible Press Office: An Insider's Guide* to answer questions I received when speaking about effective communications as a participant in the U.S. Department of State's Speakers Programs. The book was subsequently translated into nearly 30 languages, received a number of awards, and has been used as a toolkit in countries large and small, north and south, old and new.

Since the publication of *A Responsible Press Office: An Insider's Guide* more than a decade ago, new technology has transformed communications. Social media exploded onto the communications scene and raised a plethora of new questions, such as: How can I use social media with traditional media in reaching out to the press and the public? Should a government official blog? What do I do if a citizen posts a critical comment on my Facebook page? Is the message for social media different than that for the traditional press? How often do I need to update my Web page? What media should I use in a crisis: social or traditional media?

This book—*A Responsible Press Office in the Digital Age*—seeks to answer these questions, as well as address more traditional concerns such as how to combine a press office's need for a long-term strategy with its responsibilities for daily communication, how friendly government communicators should be with journalists, and how to gain access to and respect from one's boss. As in the earlier edition, the laws supporting freedom of information are not addressed in this book. This is not because they are not important—they are. They are not included because much has already been written about this topic, and I refer readers to the Bureau of International Information Program's *Media Law Handbook*.

The material here reflects my own experience working in the United States and around the world, both in and outside government. I have covered government as a reporter and columnist, worked with government officials, politicians and journalists as an NGO executive, and worked in government as a spokesperson and executive. All these experiences have informed this publication.

As with the first edition of *A Responsible Press Office*, this book is also based on the good advice, tips and quotes I have gathered through research and interviews with a number of experts. They range from government spokespersons and officials to traditional and new media journalists, bloggers and videographers. Their guidance and cooperation were crucial in developing this toolkit.

On one issue, all of the experts I consulted were in agreement. No matter the size of their organization or the tools they use to communicate, they all said that the fundamental tenet of effective communications has not changed. It's simple: Always tell the truth. Regardless of the medium of communication—be it a blog, a YouTube video, a radio interview or a print article—it's the truth that matters.



President Obama's press secretary, Jay Carney, answers questions during his daily news briefing. Transparent and effective government communication is essential in a democracy. © AP Images/Carolyn Kaster



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Why a Press Office and Have the Rules Changed?

“A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both,” said the United States’ fourth president, James Madison, in 1822. And more than a hundred years later, the country’s 35th president, John F. Kennedy, said, “The flow of ideas, the capacity to make informed choices, the ability to criticize, all of the assumptions on which political democracy rests, depend largely on communications.”

These U.S. presidents were talking about how a democracy works. Their words are even more true today in this 21st Information Century.

From the American Revolution in the 18th century came the idea that the government should be accountable to the people and that the individuals who work in the government are public servants. But serving the people is a two-way venture. In a democracy, serving the people, truthfully informing the people, is both the job of the press and the job of government officials. And in democracies where a free press and freedom of information are considered to be underpinnings, a transparent and functional government communication operation is vital. An open and transparent government is an essential ingredient for a free press.

Role of the Media and Citizens

In a democracy, citizens need factual and credible information in order to make independent judgments and informed choices. Free and independent media, including traditional, digital and social media, are essential in providing that information. Independent media serve as a watchdog over government, holding public officials to the highest standards and reporting whether or not the government is maintaining the public trust. And today, social media such as Facebook give citizens new platforms for sharing information and expressing their opinions both to each other and directly to their governments.

Through messages on LinkedIn and Facebook, tweets and other social media venues, blogs, and videos on YouTube, government officials, journalists and citizens are directly communicating. Through social media, citi-

The screenshot shows the White House Blog homepage. At the top, it features the White House logo and navigation links for 'BLOG', 'PHOTOS & VIDEO', 'BRIEFING ROOM', 'ISSUES', 'the ADMINISTRATION', 'the WHITE HOUSE', and 'our GOVERNMENT'. A search bar is located on the right. The main content area displays the title 'The White House Blog' and a featured article: 'White House White Board: CEA Chair Austan Goolsbee Explains the Jobs Trends'. Below the title, it indicates the article was posted by Jesse Lee on October 19, 2010. The article text states: 'In the second edition of White House White Board, Austan Goolsbee, Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, looks back at the President's record on the economy through the perspective of the last three years in private sector employment.' A video player is embedded, showing a man in a suit pointing to a bar chart titled 'Private Sector Job Gains/Losses'. The chart shows a significant downward trend in job gains from 2007 to 2009, with a sharp decline in 2009. The video player includes a progress bar and a 'Download Video: mp4 (49MB)' link. On the right side of the page, there is a 'WHITE HOUSE BLOGS' sidebar listing various White House entities and a 'CATEGORIES' section with links to topics like Civil Rights, Defense, and Economy.

The White House blog uses video to explain complicated economic policies. Government officials are increasingly employing social media to communicate with citizens. © AP Images/White House

zens also can monitor the accuracy not only of information from their governments, but information published by traditional print and broadcast media. Today citizens also have unprecedented opportunities to assist traditional media by providing reporters with photos, videos of events and news tips and offering solutions to governments on problems. Never before have reporters, citizens and governments had more direct contact than today in environments where there is true Internet and digital freedom, press freedom, freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, including online.

Government officials are responding to citizens' comments, blogging, tweeting about emergency information, and texting about new plans. When it works well and there is no tampering with or censoring of online and social media, government transparency and accountability are enhanced, and governments,

citizens and media can have an open dialogue.

In the digital age, the old rules still apply. The rules of truthfulness, accuracy, openness and verification stand as true today for democratic governments using digital and social media as they did for those working only with traditional media.

“Public officials should obey the same rules no matter with whom they are dealing,” said Anita Dunn, former White House communications director for President Barack Obama. What has changed is the speed and pace of news—24 hours/seven days a week. “Today we are dealing in a world that has no deadline,” she said, “because we all are on deadline all the time.”

Yet, the need to constantly put out news can overtake the facts at hand. This can make reporters' role crucial.

“Media has an even more important role in helping people sort things out,” Dunn said.

Reporters can provide context and coherence to the many story lines through analyses and background stories. They can cut through the clutter of bits and pieces of news to focus on what is important. They can be the trusted sources of information regardless of the platform used—print, broadcast, online or mobile devices.

“New media is seen as new and transcendent, but it is just another set of tools,” said the head of a U.S. government communications office. “Just like the telegraph was a new tool, social media is too. Social media helps you do more and do it quicker, but the thinking and the strategy don’t change.” What is different are the many means of communication.

“The value to us is being able to reach so many people at one time for zero cost,” Philadelphia’s former assistant managing director told the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania. The city was doing transformational work, he said, and “...we need to get this out to the people. We need to tell people what’s going on. And certainly no one here, or in the major media, is going to have the time to reach out and identify a constituency and push out this information.” With social media, two-way communication is enhanced.

What a Press Office Is and Is Not

At the core of this transfer of information between the government, media and citizens is the government communications or press office.

“A government public affairs office is central to the whole system of communicating with the people,” said a former White House press assistant. “The government press operation is the daily conduit through which the press gets information on the workings of the government.”

Explaining how government programs and policies have an impact on citizens is the major role of a government press office. This public information effort conveys government officials’ concerns and plans to the public,

“The press secretary’s job is to present the president’s positions and thoughts in a manner that helps him advance his agenda, while also helping the press learn what the government is doing. It’s a balancing act that requires careful judgment in service to two masters.”

and it helps the public understand how various issues could affect their lives.

“Governments have so much information that they need an effective way to distribute it to their citizens, and that’s where the government spokesperson comes in,” said Mike McCurry, former press secretary to President Bill Clinton. “The spokesperson is like a reporter working inside government, collecting information for the public. It is the spokesperson’s role to get as much information to the public as possible.”

Government press officials, then, have several roles. In dealing with the public and the media, they are advocates for the government’s position, explaining the merits of official action. They correct erroneous information, try to improve the interpretation and understanding of existing information, and communicate directly with the media and through social media and their websites to the public on their programs and plans. They also are advocates for the media within the government, relaying reporters’ needs, such as the desire to do a news story on a topic that government officials may or may not be ready to discuss, and relaying public concerns, such as through items picked up on social media. In a sense, spokespersons often do reporters’ work, gathering information for the press and translating what government experts have to say for the media.

Government press officials should not expect to be friends or foes of journalists.

“The press secretary’s job is to present the president’s positions and thoughts in a manner that helps him advance his agenda, while also helping the press learn what the government is doing,” said Ari Fleisher, first White House press secretary to President George W. Bush. “It’s a balancing act that requires careful judgment in service to two masters.”

The spokesperson’s role is both assertive—trying to emphasize certain aspects of the news—and reactive—responding to reporters’ questions. For example, in the United States, every day the White House releases scores of press releases, statements, announcements, and other updates on videos, blogs, Facebook, Twitter and SMS to announce new programs, appointments and activities of the president. At the same time, reporters covering the White House contact the press office with questions for stories that may or may not be those that officials want covered. Into this mix are citizen bloggers—called today’s citizen journalists—who can check errors, update information and post videos that journalists pick up and verify. Those that are legitimate become part of the major news flow.

“We definitely are the link between our governments and the people, and the translators of information from government to the people, but we also have to know what is coming our way, hear what is on the street, and translate it back to our government officials,” said a former president of the National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC).

But a government press officer is not a magician who can transform a policy or program that is not working into something that appears to be functioning well. Public relations cannot substitute for effective programs or worthwhile ideas. A press

secretary cannot create an image of honesty if government officials are not honest. He or she cannot portray a government that recognizes and responds to problems if problems persist and little is done about them. A press office cannot convince the press to write about the openness of a government that is not open or the management skills of government officials who do not manage. Nor can a press office convey a government’s objectives if the government leaders it serves are not clear about those objectives. No matter how good a government communications staff, if a policy or its implementers are weak, absent, unethical or unprofessional, they cannot make it seem otherwise.

Journalists and Government Press Officials

Government press officials should not expect to be friends or foes of journalists. Journalists should be neutral observers of government and of its actions and plans. In a democracy, press and government cannot be partners. They are natural adversaries with different functions. Each should respect the role of the other and yet recognize that a natural tension exists between the two. On the one hand, at times it’s a relationship in which officials try to tell their version of events or avoid publicity altogether, and the press looks for mistakes and pushes to get information released. On the other hand, the relationship is reciprocal. Journalists need credible and reliable government press officers to help them understand the government’s actions and plans. Government press officers need journalists to get information on the government’s actions and plans to the public. And today these roles are even more important as citizens are becoming citizen journalists, helping reporters get information, verifying data put out by governments and checking what is reported.

Some government press officers expect that a journalist who is a social friend will not write a story that is negative, but a professional journalist does not let a friendship with an official stand in the way of a story. Being a journalist is a 24-hour-a-day job, and a good journalist is never off duty.

“Spokespersons must have cordial but professional relations with reporters,” said McCurry. “They, reporters, have jobs to do, and you, spokespersons, have jobs to do. You can be friends with a reporter, but you must remember reporters are always on the job and so are you.”

But a government press officer is not a magician who can transform a policy or program that is not working into something that appears to be functioning well.

“Spokespersons can have a friendly professional relationship with a journalist, but a personal relationship can be difficult,” the former NAGC president said. “There will come a time when a reporter needs to ask probing questions or write or air a story that you may not want. You can’t just rely on friendship. Something will suffer—either the professional relationship or the friendship. But you need to have the professional rela-

tionship. You need to be able to call up a reporter and say, ‘You really blew that story.’”

The Duty of Dealing with the Press

In addition, government press officers should not stand in the way of a story. As public servants, government press officers don’t have the right to decide what is good for people to know and what is not good. Their job is to supply news material to all journalists, even those perceived as less than friendly.

Some government officials have expressed surprise when during press conferences journalists ask questions that are not on the subject of the press briefing. Journalists may have little access to government officials, and they ask questions, whether on the stated topic or not, when they get access. This is normal. It is part of having a free press.

“Press offices could be considered not only as a government subsidy or a government efficiency but as an entitlement that flows from the nature of a free society and the relationship of the state to the citizen,” wrote presidential scholar Stephen Hess in *The Government/Press Connection: Press Officers and Their Offices*. “What more natural function of government is there in a democracy than for it to make available information about how it is governing?”



U.S. Representative Zoe Lofgren watches a White House briefing from a tablet computer. A 21st century press office must be able to navigate both traditional and new media. © Corbis/ZUMA Press/Pete Marovich



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The Press Office in the Information Age

To be an effective spokesperson, the communications officer or press secretary should have a close working relationship, one of mutual respect, with the government official for whom he or she works, whether prime minister, president, minister, regional head or mayor. The spokesperson should be familiar with the official's beliefs and should have direct access to him or her, being able to walk into meetings and interrupt with pressing news without going through a scheduler or other aide. While this flexibility can disturb an orderly schedule, it results in a government that can respond quickly to media issues.

The spokesperson has to have a similar role with the staff—senior staff as well as line staff—from whom they often need to get information quickly. One complaint heard frequently worldwide is that government staff do not respond to queries for information from press officers trying to help reporters with their stories. Unless the importance of the press role is emphasized by the top managers to their staffs, the significance of the role will never be recognized.

“It is the last job a civil servant would want,” complained a government official in a country with poor government communications. “Here the spokesperson has no access, no prestige. He is not in on meetings; he is not aware of what is happening. He has no resources and no staff. And he gets in trouble with his boss when he talks to the press.

Overall it is a lose/lose situation. He doesn't speak unless he is forced to, and ultimately the spokesperson is not effective.”

In contrast, in a well-functioning system, the press officer must have a role both in communicating and in decision-making so that those formulating policy will understand the public relations ramifications of proposed actions. If, as spokesperson, the press officer has not participated in developing policy, he or she will have difficulty understanding the context of the policies and explaining it to the media.

“It is very important to have the communicator as part of the strategy team,” said a former president of the National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC). “If a government official is planning on taking an action, you need to know how it will be

perceived. It is better to have the communicator at the table, engaged in the discussion in the early formative stages, than to have to play catch-up or be blindsided by negative public reaction because the communicator, the person with the sense of public sentiments, wasn't there."

Long-Term and Short-Term Vision

According to presidential scholar Stephen Hess, on the federal level in the United States, responding to press questions takes up 50 percent of a typical press spokesperson's time, keeping informed and working on agency business 25 percent, and initiating materials and events 25 percent.

Overall the job is twofold: Doing long-range planning and operating short-term—that is, carrying out the plan on a daily basis. These involve two sets of activities: being proactive—planning, persuading, executing, carrying out the daily plan—and being reactive—responding to queries and crises. Without a well-organized operation in which both roles occur, you can lose control of long-term goals and be buffeted by day-to-day events and crises.

In the White House, planning and executing are split between two offices: the office of White House communications director and the office of press secretary. The two work very closely together, with the former

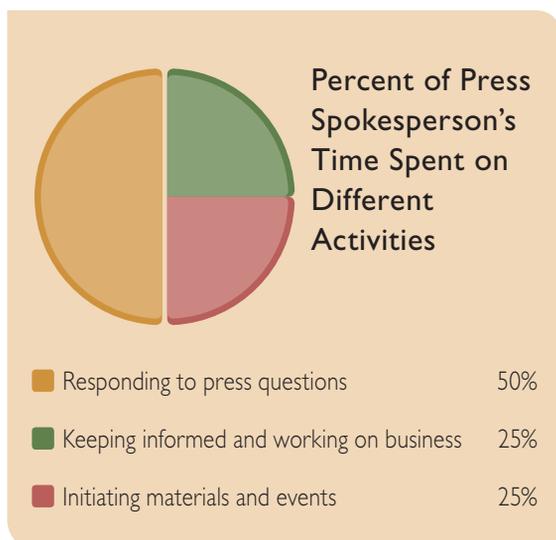
Segregating traditional and "new" media can result in conflicting messages, which is why they should be integrated in a communications or press office.

being responsible for long-range planning and the latter for executing the daily plan and responding to queries from the media.

Elsewhere in most of the U.S. government, the two roles—planning and executing—typically are located in one office. Often the communications director, or public affairs director, handles the long-range planning, and a press secretary reports to him or her. In some cases this can be reversed. But whether two offices with many staff members or one office with one person doing both jobs, the key is that there be long-range planning, short-term execution and interaction with the media—both traditional and online. Without this, communication becomes reactive rather than proactive—putting out a government's message on its plans and programs.

"The most important ingredient for good communications has not changed: responsive, well-reasoned messages that don't sound like canned talking points," said Dana Perino, White House press secretary to President George W. Bush. "So in the communications operations, it's important to have both types of people—those thinking about what to say, and those getting the word out in all of the different platforms."

One structural element that initially vexed communication offices was where to put "new" media, particularly social media. As one communications official at the Pentagon explained, "For a while new/social media was treated as a separate capability and located in the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Community Relations/Public Liaison on the theory that social media represented the 21st century 'community.' That arrangement



ended up a bust as it effectively ‘ghettoized’ this function to where it was irrelevant.

“Now new media is part of the main press office, where the expectation is that the normal press officers will do Twitter/Facebook and other updates as well as respond to things in the blogosphere.”

Segregating traditional and “new” media can result in conflicting messages, which is why they should be integrated in a communications or press office.

The communication and press officers’ jobs can be broken down into many tasks:

- ⇒ Serving as the government spokesperson who conducts regular or special briefings.
- ⇒ Managing the day-to-day activities of the press office.
- ⇒ Assisting in developing government policies and in developing strategies to convey them to the media and the public.
- ⇒ Planning and managing media campaigns to put out a consistent long-term message.
- ⇒ Handling press inquiries.
- ⇒ Setting up interviews and briefings for the press with government officials.
- ⇒ Overseeing the content on Web pages, blogging, and using social, mobile and other digital technologies.
- ⇒ Advising government officials and staff on press relations and potential media reaction to proposed policies.
- ⇒ Overseeing speech writing, or at least reviewing speeches and their messages.
- ⇒ Staging events such as news conferences.
- ⇒ Preparing news releases, fact sheets and other materials.
- ⇒ Serving as a liaison with or supervisor of other government press offices.
- ⇒ Arranging transportation and hotel accommodations for the traveling press.
- ⇒ Issuing press credentials.
- ⇒ Coordinating messages with the introduction of legislative initiatives.
- ⇒ Supervising agency internal communications as well as its external ones.

- ⇒ Monitoring and evaluating communications effects and planning how to do better next time.

Establishing the Press Officer’s Job

In establishing the position of spokesperson, the first responsibility lies with the government official. The top government official must determine with the spokesperson how the press office will be organized and what its responsibilities will be. The official must make important decisions about the structure of the press office. For instance:

- ⇒ Whether long-range communications and daily press operations will be in the same office or in two offices that work closely together.
- ⇒ To whom the press secretary will report. It often is to the chief of staff but with a direct line to the top official.
- ⇒ What will be the spokesperson’s relationship with the rest of the official’s staff?
- ⇒ What will be the relationship between the press department and other ministries and departments? This is especially critical if the official is head of the government or of a ministry with subordinate agencies or regional offices.

The government official also has to make decisions about how he or she will use the press office.

- ⇒ How available does the government official wish to be to the press?
- ⇒ How often will he or she be interviewed and do press conferences?
- ⇒ Will he or she blog, tweet or post messages on Facebook? It is always best when these are part of the overall communications plan and worked in unison with the press office.
- ⇒ May the spokesperson speak on his/her behalf? Or will only the government official do press briefings?

In the best of circumstances, the government official is readily accessible to the press, does frequent press conferences, blogs, uses social media—working through his or her



Dana Perino, press secretary for President George W. Bush, believes good communications require “well-reasoned messages that don’t sound like canned talking points.” © AP Images/Ron Edwards

press office—and also has a spokesperson who can speak on his or her behalf. At the White House, for example, the press secretary holds a daily televised press briefing but steps aside when the president appears to address the press in person.

Relations with Other Government Staff

The authority the press officer has with the rest of the government official’s top staff and entire bureaucracy is also important. Among the issues are:

- ⇒ Is the press officer the initial point of contact with the press, and does he or she have authority over the staff’s relationships with the press? It is best when this happens.
- ⇒ Are other offices authorized to answer questions, other than routine queries, without first consulting with the press office? For example, if a reporter calls the

scheduling office with a simple scheduling question, such as the time of an event, should it be routed to the press office or can the scheduler answer it?

- ⇒ Who needs to review the press office’s news releases, speeches and policy statements?
- ⇒ Does the press office manage the Website, social media content such as Facebook page and tweets? It is crucial that information on the government agency’s website and social media be in synch with the information disseminated to more traditional media.
- ⇒ How will digital media be used to update and respond to journalists?
- ⇒ Must other top-level staff, such as the chief of staff, have sign-off authority on public statements?
- ⇒ Will the spokesperson have access to the top-level staff in the office and be part of the senior governing team? Again, this is important.

Interaction with the Press

In many operations, when a reporter has a question the first point of contact is the press secretary. If he or she cannot answer the question immediately, the press secretary typically turns to a government specialist who has the information. Either the specialist talks directly to the reporter or the press secretary, sufficiently briefed by the specialist, does. Talking to the expert is often the most satisfactory as journalists like to speak to those with the most knowledge of a topic, particularly on complicated issues.

Often the press secretary coordinates staff interaction with the media. At a minimum, a press secretary needs to know as soon as possible whether or not a staff member has had any interaction with the press and what topics were discussed. If there are no clear procedures, an administration could respond with contradictory information, with the result that the public is left confused and ultimately mistrusting of information put out by government officials.

Organizations typically have procedures on working with the media—not to impede

information getting out but to ensure that the correct information gets out quickly to reporters and the public. For example, one department requests that all press inquiries go through the press office. The staff responds immediately to reporters' requests and either quickly answers questions themselves or more typically switches them to a specialist. The goal is to respond rapidly and accurately to queries with the fullest factual information available. If more time is required, the reporter is told what is involved in getting the information and how long it will take. This procedure holds true whether it is a newspaper or television reporter requesting information or a blogger not affiliated with a news organization.

The procedures shouldn't be cumbersome, as they were in the finance ministry of a new democracy. When a reporter emailed or called requesting information, the press secretary had to take the question to the minister, who decided which staff person would answer. The press secretary then took the question to the designated staffer, who wrote a response. This then went back to the minister for approval or editing. The press secretary then emailed a response to the reporter. The process could take weeks, and if the journalist needed additional information this cumbersome system started all over again.

In today's Information Age, a reporter on deadline, who cannot wait weeks, days or hours for an answer, will go elsewhere for information, which might not be complete—or even correct. Journalists cannot report factually if government officials don't respond and assist them. One journalist in a new democracy admitted that his biggest challenge to producing quality and balanced reporting was the unwillingness of authorities to provide information. Despite numerous attempts to reach authorities to give their perspectives on an important issue or to verify information, the reporter usually got no response. The usual answer he received was, "I'm busy," or "I am not allowed to talk about this." This, he admitted, often leads to limited information or

misinformation as the story must be done with or without the government's help.

Using social media can help. "When it comes to government, social media has brought about as much transparency as possible all the time," said Anita Dunn, former communications director to President Barack Obama. "There are few secrets that will be kept. And with social media the expectation of transparency is growing around the globe."

Relationships with Other Press Offices

Among the issues to consider when setting up a central press office are:

- ⇒ How can information/communication be coordinated between the main press office and those in outlying areas within that ministry and across government offices? Regular meetings, conference calls and email exchanges help.
- ⇒ How will information move among them? Will they have daily, weekly or monthly conference calls or meetings? Will schedules of upcoming events be regularly shared?
- ⇒ Should the chief government press secretary have authority that extends to Cabinet-level agencies?



TRY THIS

A JOB BY MANY NAMES

The job of government communicator can go by many names. In the U.S. federal government it can be known as: information officer, public information specialist, press officer, public affairs manager or officer, communications specialist, press secretary, spokesperson or community relations officer, but rarely by the term public relations. At the local level, such as city government, communications and public relations manager is often used.

“Credibility is the single most important asset of the spokesperson.”

- ⇒ Who will hire the spokespersons in the ministries and agencies? Will it be the top government press official or each agency head or will it be done by consensus between the two?
- ⇒ What news will the top government official announce on behalf of or with Cabinet offices?
- ⇒ How do the subordinate offices fit into the overall media strategy?
- ⇒ What materials, such as press releases, interviews and blog posts, and acceptance of speaking engagements, need to be cleared by the central government press office before being released? How will a review be done?
- ⇒ What upcoming events or situations might impede the message a government official wants to send out? What procedures have been set up to get information from the other agencies and ministries? Sharing schedules among departments, having regular meetings to discuss event calendars, and sharing messages on upcoming events can help.

A Credible Spokesperson

What characteristics make a good press secretary? According to former Clinton White House spokesperson Mike McCurry, press secretaries need “a sense of humor, enormous patience, an ability to speak and write quickly, and an uncompromising attitude about the truth.

“Credibility,” he said, “is the single most important asset of the spokesperson.”

In *The Government/Press Connection*, Hess wrote that press officers say they need stamina, curiosity, a helpful nature, good memory, civility, coolness under pressure, an understanding of human psychology, and an ability to predict and handle logistical details.

It also helps if a spokesperson quickly learns facts. He or she should be able to handle the unpredictable, manage many tasks simultaneously, deal with constant interruptions, and be quick to react. A spokesperson should be evenhanded with reporters—that is, not play favorites. Above all, the spokesperson should be a person of high personal ethics and integrity.

A spokesperson must maintain his or her credibility and so should the boss. To be effective, a press secretary must be believed by the press, and he or she won’t be if answers prove to be false or misleading.

“The government media effort doesn’t work when the spokesperson is not trusted by the media or is frozen out from the information flow within the government,” admitted a former press secretary.

Helping Reporters

Being a reporter is demanding. It often requires long hours, and the ability to juggle numerous daily assignments on numerous topics, sometimes with little time to do thorough research. Government communications need to understand the difficulties of the job, the deadlines and demands.

“Remember that the physical demands of reporting and the long hours make for cranky reporters,” said McCurry. “You should try to take care of reporters’ basic needs. Make sure they have access to food and drink, that their physical working environment is conducive to compiling and filing their stories, and that the employees of the government press office are helpful.”

Even though many journalists report on an hourly, even minute-to-minute basis, they need time to research, interview and write stories. They also like to know about news events in advance so they can approve a story idea with their editors, schedule a photographer, and do additional research. The White House press office gives reporters not only daily schedules but also week-in-advance schedules so they can see what public events are coming up.

When there is a breaking news story, such as a sudden political controversy or crisis, a

reporter may have to cover the story with little background, making the task of writing a well-informed article harder. Consequently, the more information that can be made available to reporters the better. It also is important to learn the lead times and needs for each type of media. They can vary a good deal.

The spokesperson's job requires balancing many relationships—with the government official he or she represents, with the rest of the top-level government staff, with the press, with the permanent bureaucracy, and with the public through the Web and social media. The spokesperson must also be visi-

ble for the boss when that would be helpful and in the background when the boss has the press spotlight.

“The most important thing to remember,” said former Clinton administration spokesperson Dee Dee Myers, “is that even though the job can be aggravating, difficult and frustrating at times, it is incumbent on government press offices to help the press get the story right.... The system works best when it provides a great degree of openness for the press. Openness is not something to be afraid of.”



TO THE POINT

STAGES IN DEVELOPING PRESS OFFICES

No media office will ever be effective unless it is fully integrated into the top echelons of an organization, has the support of the boss and the staff, and has institutionalized procedures for getting out the news that are respected—not tampered with—by senior management. A spokesperson cannot alone make an effective communications operation. It must come from the top: from the top government official.

A spokesperson also cannot serve properly unless he or she knows the background of issues and the context in which decisions are made. Simply designating someone to be the communicator does not do the trick. If the spokesman cannot give credible answers, reporters have to go elsewhere for information, and that information may be incorrect.

Emerging democracies sometimes go through several stages before having effective and transparent press operations. These include:

- ⇒ Having no press officer at all.
- ⇒ Assigning the duties of communication to a staffer who has many other tasks. Typical is adding the role of press secretary or spokesman to an individual who may also be in charge of research or policy, or even serve as the chief of staff. When this happens, communications usually does not occur and is the last role to which the official pays any attention.
- ⇒ Giving an employee the full-time assignment of spokesperson or information officer but giving him or her little authority. Sometimes the spokesperson has little or no access to the minister for whom he or she is supposed to serve as communicator. The result: a job with no authority and ineffective communications.
- ⇒ Having a press secretary who is overloaded with too many media tasks—writing press releases, arranging press conferences, monitoring the news—and no staff. The press secretary becomes ineffective and focuses only in crisis mode and not as someone who can proactively communicate the organization's plans.
- ⇒ Having scattered press operations within an organization. In the foreign ministry of a coalition government, one office spoke for the minister, another for the ministry, and another did news monitoring and research.
- ⇒ Getting to the optimum: an integrated, quickly responding press office using all communications platforms.



Robert Gibbs (standing, right), President Obama's first press secretary, attends a meeting to plan a presidential visit. Coordination is crucial to effective communications. *Official White House Photo by Pete Souza*



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The Press Office at Work

While each government press office in the United States may be structured differently than the next, they have identical duties. They deal with the press, keep their government colleagues informed about press interests, and through websites and social media, communicate not only with reporters but also directly with the public. A few mainly handle relations with reporters; most do that plus manage all modes of communication, such as websites, social media, videos, photography, publications and speeches. Importantly, they not only answer questions from the media and citizens, who may respond to blogs, but they also proactively push out information about government policies, plans and operations.

Press offices are staffed in various ways. If the office has limited staff, as with a small news operation, the division of labor is informal, and most of the employees may be generalists. If it is larger, as with a larger news bureau, there may be several press officers, and each may have a “beat” or subject assignment. Other offices are arranged by media specialty, with some press officers handling only print media, others managing video and audio and others social media. The size of

the staff also depends on the number of reporters with whom the office has to deal and the duties of the office—for example, does it handle just press and social media or also speech writing, photography, videography and news monitoring?

Above all, what is needed is a structured, disciplined yet flexible and quickly moving operation comfortable with all modes of communication—traditional, Web-based and social media.

Thinking Long-Term and Short-Term

A press office must act proactively as well as reactively. The press office must be responsive to the media—dealing with breaking news and crises, quickly answering their questions. At the same time, it must be proactive—regularly getting out information on government plans, policies and procedures both to reporters and to citizens through Web pages and social and digital media. This requires having a long-term plan. As happens at the White House, the communications office may be separate from but linked to a press office, which carries out the plan. Or the two may be in the same office with the strategic communications operation and the daily press operation under the same boss.

In large operations, it can difficult for one person to do long-range planning and short-range execution. Unless an operation is firmly in place for long-range planning, the daily crises will always overtake the planning process. Crises or scandals are

“If you are always reacting to questions, you most likely are not advancing your best arguments.”

urgent and can push the planned message aside unless a firm mechanism is in place to plan for future communications and implement the plan. That is why in high-visibility, fast-paced offices, usually one person thinks short-term—daily press—and another long-term—strategic message planning for the future.

“If you are always reacting to questions, you most likely are not advancing your best arguments,” said former White House spokesperson Mike McCurry. “You must have a proactive plan to deliver your message to the citizens, and you must communicate your message relentlessly.”

“In the White House, the job of delivering the news is different from the job of packaging the news, and that is why we had a press secretary and a communications director,” McCur-

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR RESPONSIBILITIES

Long-term Planning

- ▣ Strategizing.
- ▣ Planning messages and themes.
- ▣ Writing up a master schedule.
- ▣ Monitoring Cabinet departments on their upcoming press announcements and coordinating messages with them.
- ▣ Planning out-of-town trips.
- ▣ Supervising speech writing, photography, research, the website and social media.
- ▣ Monitoring the news-clipping office.
- ▣ Handling communications with out-of-town media—mainly the nonpolitical capital press.

PRESS SECRETARY RESPONSIBILITIES

Short-term Implementation

- ▣ Pushing out the government’s message on a daily basis as well as responding to press questions.
- ▣ Initiating media contacts.
- ▣ Talking to the press.
- ▣ Preparing and emailing press releases and fact sheets.
- ▣ Tweeting messages.
- ▣ Arranging interviews and press conferences with government officials.
- ▣ Blogging.
- ▣ Sending SMS messages.
- ▣ Alerting press by social media, SMS, faxes or phone calls of events and announcements.

ry said. “You need to have people who craft the message, prepare the best arguments to put forward, and you need people who can deliver those messages over and over on a daily basis. The first job is that of the communications director, and the second is that of the press secretary. It is similar in business to having one person develop the product and one sell it.”

During the administration of President George H. W. Bush (1989–1993), press secretary Marlin Fitzwater handled both the long-term and short-term jobs for nine months. He found it to be an impossible task.

“As press secretary, you are involved in acute problems always on a daily news basis,” Fitzwater said. “You have to get immediate answers to immediate problems, and you don’t have time to focus on long-term strategies. Even if you get the time, it is hard to reorient your mind to think where you want to be in two months.”

The media views the press secretary differently when the two roles are combined, he added. “They see the communications director as a propagandist making up the themes of the day, creating the lines, and the press interprets that role as being one of less than candor.” But being known for honesty and integrity is crucial to a press secretary’s reputation and effectiveness. “You are compromised if you do both jobs,” he said.

In one important ministry in a new government, communication duties are split among several offices: a spokesman, solo, working directly for the minister; a 12-member research office that also handles foreign and regional press; and a communications office with three staff focusing on long-range strategic planning. Each has its own boss and they meet rarely. The chief of staff defended the arrangement as the spokesman being able to focus on the minister—that is, until he could not get information when a world crisis occurred. The solution: having the spokesperson supervise and coordinate all the communication duties and staff through a good administrator.

“Without coordination, the job can’t get done well.”

Coordination Is Crucial

Any successful public relations effort depends heavily on coordination with other departments within your agency, with staff in your agency, and with departments outside your agency.

“Without coordination, the job can’t get done well,” said a former government spokesperson.

For a government official and his or her press office, the first rule should be: no surprises—or at least as few as possible. One way to avoid this is to have excellent communication throughout the bureaucracy so an early warning system will highlight difficult issues likely to bubble up. Surprises will al-

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR VS. PRESS SECRETARY

Sometimes the communications director runs the office, and the press secretary reports to him or her. For example, the communications director to a former U.S. governor directed both operations. He occasionally handled press questions if he knew a reporter well or if the topic was of particular interest to him. He rarely traveled with the governor. The press secretary, who reported to the communications director, and her staff handled all media questions, spoke “on the record,” and traveled with the governor. The press secretary, like the communications director, had direct access to the governor. Each kept the other informed when he or she took on a media issue.

Alternatively, the press secretary may run the office, and the communications director reports to him or her. The press secretary handles the daily press operation. The communications director manages long-range strategy, speech writing and the website and social media.

ways come up, but they can be minimized with planning and coordination.

To avoid surprises, the public affairs office in a large U.S. Cabinet department with many bureaus and regional offices has regular conference calls with the public affairs offices of its bureaus and regions so that it can stay on top of issues before they burst into controversies.

The “no surprises” rule is crucial in the relationship between the central government office and government departments. Much of the agenda of a government is carried out through Cabinet offices and ministries, and to operate effectively good coordination should occur from the center out and the outside in. This means a constant sharing of information, resulting in coherent rather than conflicting messages. Ideally, it should be like a wheel with the center as the hub and the spokes as Cabinet offices or ministries coming out from it. The same model applies to a ministry’s coordination with its bureaus.

Working together ensures that a program will get off to a good start. Fitzwater asked the communications directors of each Cabinet department to report all announcements they felt could make front-page news. He did it with the idea that the president could announce elements of each department’s major news and that he would know about any controversial news before it happened.

Even when two government officials agree on an issue, combining their efforts will make a message stronger. A novice state governor learned this when he ignored the need for message coordination. His chief of staff gave one message on the governor’s goals to the press, the chief of policy another, and the press secretary yet a third. The media reported on the resulting chaos, and the governor’s public approval ratings dropped precipitously. It was only when the press operation became integrated with the rest of the staff that a coherent message developed, press coverage improved and the public began to support the governor’s programs.

“It is really important that everyone within an organization understand its priorities and

mission so that they reflect the same agenda,” said a former assistant secretary for public affairs at several Cabinet-level departments. “That does not mean speaking in lockstep, but if people don’t understand the mission and priorities, they will not speak to the public in a coordinated way, and the organization will be diminished as an effective force.”

Coordination also means managing the news production. An important ministry in one country tried hard to get news out by having one press conference a week into which eight to 10 important news items were announced. Only four or five ever got press coverage. Even in today’s 24-hour news cycle, news only has so much space and time. For this ministry, planning and spacing out news production would have worked better so that news could have been released throughout the week and the daily appetite for news could have been constantly fed.

“It is really important that everyone within an organization understand its priorities and mission so that they reflect the same agenda.”

In another example, a U.S. state governor’s press secretary did not appreciate the importance of coordinating messages when three state events, which could have been spread throughout the week, occurred on the same day. The governor’s press conference got little coverage, and the ministers she appointed got more. The press office of each Cabinet official had made its own arrangements without working through the governor’s press office. When public opinion polls showed a perception of chaos in the governor’s office, the governor’s press secretary began requesting press schedules of the various state Cabinet officials and moved events around if they conflicted with the governor’s. Media messages were coordi-

nated, and the governor stopped competing with her Cabinet for press attention.

Coordination also relates to timing. In one newly democratized country, every ministry has a press operation but there is literally no interaction among them. Sometimes five or six different government press conferences are scheduled at the same time. A television news director complained: “I have only four camera crews, yet there will be five government press conferences at the same hour. So I have to choose.” A minister whose press conference was not covered complained to her vociferously. “I told him, his press conference was less important than the other four happening at the same time. What was missing: coordination. The government—not the journalists—should choose which of their events is more important than the others.”

Officials in many coalition governments complain that coordination is impossible because representatives of widely varying

political parties are in key positions throughout a government. This hurdle does not belie the fact that coordination is just as essential in a coalition government as it is in a winner-take-all election.

Day-To-Day Activities of the Press Office

Meetings » Frequent meetings may seem to fill a day, leaving time for little else, but they can be essential to a smoothly operating system. Meeting goals include the sharing of information, anticipation of news, and the preparation to handle it. In the United States, regular meetings occur between spokespersons, communication officers, those handling digital and social media and with government colleagues who are not in press relations, and they usually occur daily, often several times a day.

Many U.S. federal offices begin their days with early-morning meetings of senior staff, including the spokesperson and, if in separate



Former White House press secretaries, Dana Perino (left) and Dee Dee Myers, meet outside the White House. Regular meetings can be essential to a smoothly operating press office. © AP Images/Pablo Matinez Monsivais



TRY THIS

A PRESS OFFICE AT WORK

- Have someone to think long-term. Media efforts should not be just short-term and deal only with crises.
- Have daily meetings both with the press staff and with ministry senior staff so that all are on board with the media message.
- Coordinate with other departments and ministries to avoid surprises.
- Keep media monitoring manageable. Employ outside contractors to do the job so you can focus on getting information to the press and public.
- Make the press agenda yours, not just the media's. If needed, get the question and call back promptly with a well-thought-out answer.

offices, the communications planner. Typically the meetings last about 20 to 30 minutes, with the senior staff member talking about the principal concerns of the day—the government official's top issues, schedule, and meetings, for example. Each staff member might briefly discuss upcoming issues, such as legislation, press interviews, budget questions and newsworthy topics. The press secretary would provide information about press coverage that morning, what breaking news might affect the government official, and the message of the day, week or month.

Following this meeting, the spokesperson typically holds a second meeting with the press relations staff to debrief them on the critical issues of the day. This meeting follows the format of the senior staff gathering with each member of the press staff commenting about what he or she is working on, reviewing the government official's schedule, and discussing media messages and topics that might

be raised by reporters that day. The press secretary makes assignments, and the staff asks questions of various Cabinet offices. If a daily briefing occurs, the staff might make up a briefing book with government policies or positions on current, important topics to which the press spokesperson could refer in a briefing. The day is spent pushing out messages through the media—print, broadcast and digital—answering questions and going directly to the public through blogs, Web pages and social media.

Coordination in press offices of U.S. state governors and country and city officials is similar to that on a federal government level. Depending on the size of government, a spokesperson may participate in a morning staff meeting with senior staff that the official might attend or to which he or she may phone in to discuss the morning's press priorities and events for the day. In smaller jurisdictions, this meeting is held more infrequently, such as weekly. Many press spokespersons also routinely have meetings with the press secretaries for the various departments and agencies in their governments.

It is important for press and communications to be part of meetings with key members of an official's staff to discuss press issues, politics, planning and programs and how they relate to communications and how events can be used to reinforce an official's agenda.

News Monitoring » Knowing what is being said about you is a key element of the job. Many government agencies compile themselves or subscribe to an outside vendor to track print news stories, broadcasts, and online and social media. The task can be done internally, such as by staff who come in early to read print and online news and review broadcasts, or contracted out to companies who do this task. The form can be a composite of the most important stories—positive and negative—followed by less important ones. It is often organized by topic. Sometimes composites of the key messages are written and sometimes the entire piece is



Scott McClellan, former press secretary for President George W. Bush, shares homemade brownies with press aboard Air Force One. Government communicators must be accessible, otherwise reporters will go elsewhere for information. © AP Images/Pablo Matinez Monsivais

run. It is important to track a variety of news sources—not just print.

In one new government, the most senior staff in a press office daily clipped, pasted and summarized articles from newspapers and magazines for the dozen top staff. Although 80 percent of the news came from television, there was no monitoring of TV or social media as the former was felt to be too expensive and the latter too difficult to track. Consequently they missed much of the important news.

In a small former Soviet Union country, a key ministry had one press staffer, who spent hours each day compiling a news summary sent only to the minister. She had little time to work with reporters, who soon went elsewhere to get information. This changed when a government-wide contract was given to an outside news-monitoring firm, freeing the press secretary to spend more time working with journalists.

Today in most regions of the world, private companies can search and record print, digital and broadcast stories by key words or dates and send videos and transcripts. Analysis of coverage trends is also important and can be done effectively by outside contractors.

Electronic Messages » In this Information Age, news is nonstop, 24 hours a day. In the United States, the press offices of the White House and the top-level departments have a duty officer system so that a press officer is available 24 hours, including evenings and weekends, to answer questions from the media. A duty officer system enables press offices to operate in the 24-hour-a-day news cycle. In smaller departments or agencies, when no duty officer system is in place, press secretaries typically give their cell phone numbers to reporters so they can be reached on breaking news.

This is particularly important when a reporter is working on a big story. Reporters and spokespersons will exchange cell phone

To reach people, you must go where your desired audience is.

numbers, email and Twitter addresses and reach out to each other on Facebook so questions can be answered or information initiated after hours. If a press official has been working with a reporter on a story, this would preclude bringing in a new spokesperson who may be less knowledgeable about the subject. “I would rather have a reporter call me at home and get accurate and thorough information, as opposed to getting a sloppy story because the on-duty spokesperson wasn’t as familiar with the information,” said a public affairs officer with a U.S. military organization.

Being Available » Having reporters call the top government official directly eliminates the “filter” of a secretary or aide answering the phone, finding out who is calling, and determining the subject of the call. But this can put the government official at the mercy of the press when he or she might not be prepared. Having an aide answer the initial call means that someone is always able to take the media’s questions, and it allows the official to be prepared to give an informed response.

It is essential, however, that the aide—likely the spokesperson—keep his or her cell phone switched on for calls, text messages or other communication and promptly respond to reporters. Otherwise, the press will go elsewhere for information.

“You don’t have to answer a question immediately,” said a former president of the National Association of Government Communicators. “You have a right not to be ambushed. It is better to get back to a reporter than to misspeak.”

What you can always say, a former White House official said, is “You caught me at a bad time. What is your deadline? Let me get back to you.”

Putting Workers Where the Work Is

Working effectively with the media, whether traditional, such as newspapers, television and radio, or digital and social media, does not necessarily require spending more money, hiring more staff, or buying more equipment. It may just mean shifting resources. And it does mean that to reach people, you must go where your desired audience is.

On paper, the media office in a ministry had an enormous communications staff. But the number of staff actually working with the press was small. Most worked on ministerial television productions and publications sold in kiosks. Few watched the programs and fewer bought the publications. The small press staff felt overwhelmed with media inquiries, and reporters complained of the slow response and how little information they received. The ministry would have been well served to shift its resources—people and equipment—to where its citizens got their news: independent and social media.

In another country, far more sophisticated in its ability to get out the news, adults were getting information through their television, radio and newspapers. Youth who used social media and text messages were not. The country had a bulging youth population, and the government complained about not reaching them. It wasn’t until the government reached out to youth through the media they used—social media and youth radio programs—that young people started to pay attention.



TO THE POINT

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

No matter the presidential administration, the White House press secretary typically begins his or her day very early by scanning the print and online news at home, while also listening to news broadcasts. This early start gives the spokesperson a good idea of issues reporters will be covering and asking about during the work day.

The in-office day begins around 7:30 a.m. with an early meeting attended by top White House staff, typically including the president's chief of staff, chief deputies and key advisers. This has been described by Martha Joynt Kumar in *Managing the President's Message: The White House Communications Operation* as a decision meeting. A second, much larger meeting follows. It is double the size and comprised of people running various White House operations and is mainly an informational meeting focused on expected activities and issues of the day.

At the operations meeting, the press secretary focuses on news items he or she anticipates arising during the day and what messages he or she hopes to communicate. The press secretary follows these two meetings with another one with his or her press office staff. They discuss the day's principal news: what they anticipate and what they want to communicate.

The spokesperson may also do a morning gaggle, or informal briefing, with the reporters who usually cover the White House, to exchange information on the president's schedule and message that day and reporters' likely topics.

Much of the rest of the morning is spent preparing for the afternoon televised press briefing. Deputy and assistant press secretaries track subject areas and government agencies and spend the morning gathering information to help the press secretary answer questions expected to come up in the televised briefing.

Typically the press secretary or deputy press secretary has a daily conference call with his or her counterparts in the departments of State and Defense and the Office of National Security Affairs, among others, to formulate a single message on foreign affairs issues.

The daily briefing, usually held in the early afternoon, is broadcast live, transcribed and sent around the U.S. government and to world leaders, as well as posted on the White House website in written transcript and video format. Some cable television channels also broadcast the session live.

After the briefing, the press secretary and his or her staff spend much of the rest of the day answering questions from reporters and attending meetings with the president and other senior staff. At the end of the day, there usually is a wrap-up meeting with senior White House officials to go over the news and events of the day and anticipate the next.

The cycle starts all over again the following morning.



President Obama meets with Press Secretary Jay Carney in the Oval Office. Leaders and communications officers should work closely together. *Official White House Photo by Pete Souza*



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The Proactive Strategic Communications Plan

The first step in successfully communicating plans and programs with the public is knowing what you want to achieve and developing a strategic plan to communicate it.

Strategic communication is a well-defined process for achieving long-term communications goals. It requires a variety of elements, including sustained and consistent information, coordination, and complementary internal and external communication to both general and targeted audiences at appropriate times. The strategy should be supported by a good research plan to measure public attitudes, define audiences and test ways to change attitudes or behaviors. An effective strategy also requires monitoring and evaluation on whether the goals are being achieved and, if not, what else can be done. Strategically planning your communications helps you avoid merely reacting to day-to-day events and issues.

Think of it as an international football or American soccer team with offensive and defensive players. The offensive players push to the goal—getting out a message. The defensive team responds to questions and does the daily work of implementing the message. Both are important. Both need plans, but without a clearly articulated game plan, the proactive role—that of pushing out the message—can get lost in the defensive role of dealing with the crisis of the day. Under a good game plan, your team

members would know the plays they should carry out; so should your communications staff. Ultimately, good communication is a balancing of the long-term goals with the short-term demands—balancing the offense with the defense.

In proactive communication, the first step is having an objective—something you want to achieve—with subsequent communication planned to explain and achieve it. This includes devising a game plan to communicate why achieving this objective is important and

what the public should do to get there. The goal could require behavior change (such as reducing smoking rates), attitude change (such as getting public support for extending the school day), or legislative action (such as passing a bill to change health care delivery). Often they are a combination.

From your objective, you develop your main message. Your goal is what you want to accomplish. The message articulating that goal captures your ideas in a way that can be easily understood.

Although a government is likely to have many goals it wants to achieve, it often needs to bundle them into three or four overarching objectives to have coherence. Talking about too many can be confusing and result in losing the public's attention. For example, under the goal of strengthening the economy could be the goals of reducing unemployment, boosting exports and increasing investment in the country. Typically a government would talk about three to four major objectives and have for each no more than one major message with no more than three submessages.

Messages need to be consistent. With the Internet and social media, conflicting messages stand out. Information can be targeted and nuanced in different ways to different audiences, but the overall main message must be the same. And it must be short, easy to understand, easy to explain and easy to remember.

Messages should be repeated. The goal is to create an echo chamber in which the message is heard over and over. Social media is especially useful for amplifying. Messages also should be repeated and articulated by different people in different venues to different audiences. What resonates with an elderly person is different than what resonates with a 20-year-old.

So why not just throw out your message to the public and let it take its course? Because, chances are you won't get anywhere if you do.

If you want to make economic changes in the way the government is run, for instance, you need to communicate why you are pro-

posing what you want to do, what effect it will have and on whom, how much it will cost or how much it will save, how you will know whether the program reaches its goals, and how long it will take to do so. The strategic communications plan is your map to reach your destination; the media campaign represents the roads to get there.

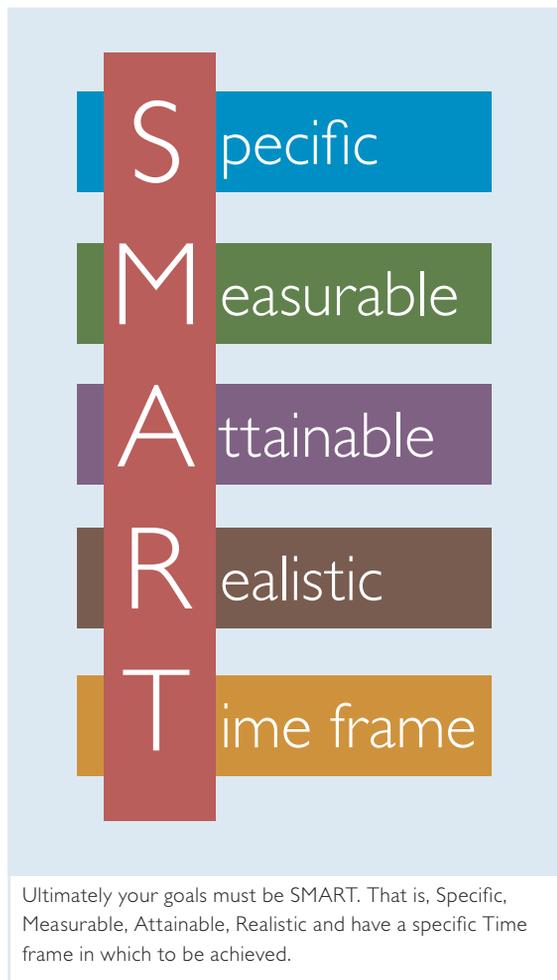
Ultimately your goals must be SMART. That is, Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and have a specific Time frame in which to be achieved. Your "stakeholders" or audiences are more likely to pay attention to and act on consistent messaging. When you coordinate your communication channels and put out your message systematically and simultaneously and repeat it, you can deliver a clear, consistent and compelling "sound" or message.

The Message Starts with the Leader

Developing action goals with resulting messages is not the exclusive responsibility of the press office. The government communications office/press office can devise a strategic communications plan and implement a media campaign but it cannot successfully do this alone. The government leader and the senior staff, as well as the government communicators, must collaborate to develop their goals and communication to articulate them.

It all starts with the boss. Unless he or she is engaged and works closely with the communications officer, success is unattainable.

One newly elected government official chose his campaign press secretary to be his spokesperson. Although the spokesperson had known the goal of the campaign—to win—since the politician had taken office he rarely had discussed the "current message" or theme with the government official. The focus was on getting legislation passed. There were no meetings between the elected official and his press secretary and his senior staff to articulate and amend goals and assess progress. The spokesperson



was left on his own to talk to the press. “How do you decide on your own what the message is?” the spokesperson asked. The answer is you don’t.

Ideally, the top official, working with his communications officer, press secretary and senior staff, has articulated three to five objectives that he or she would like to accomplish long-term. These typically come from campaign goals. More than five can be too much for the public to absorb. As an example, these are five that one recently democratized state considered: advance European Union reforms, achieve civil service reforms, push privatization goals, strengthen the economy and fight corruption.

The message should be frequently repeated and made a focal point of the administration. Every action the official takes—delivering a speech, giving an interview, writing a blog post, talking to legislators—should center as

much as possible around the long-term objectives. Certainly, the official will have to develop short-term messages to deal with crises as they crop up, but the overall goals should constantly be repeated and returned to.

Misunderstandings often stem from a lack of basic information and discussion. A government must provide clear, repeated and open communication on issues to earn public understanding and acceptance for its objectives. And never has this been more possible than today with the explosion of digital and mobile tools that directly engage citizens.

Governmental leaders learn the hard way when they are not good communicators; they might not be re-elected to office. Surveys in one recently democratized state showed that the citizens knew they had to suffer some difficult economic times to get to an improved economy, but they did not know how. The government had articulated no message. Government officials had said they wanted a stronger economy, but they had never spelled out what steps should be taken to get there, why certain measures had to be taken, how their plan would work, when better times could be expected, who would be affected and how, and where the biggest impact would be felt. Instead, they focused their attention on getting measures through the legislature and not on building citizen support. The press set the agenda. To the public, they appeared to be lurching from issue to issue and crisis to crisis.

Creating a Communications Plan

Once goals are identified, the government communications or press office writes up a plan to move the government’s vision into reality. A first step is research, often by the long-term communications staff, into how the goals can be achieved and what this will mean in the interim and long-term.

With the goals and research in hand, the communications and press staff can do a public relations audit, which is an assessment of how the action and goals are viewed by those within an organization and the public outside. It involves polls, focus groups and

surveys to identify the strengths and weaknesses of a plan and arguments that might be used in support of or opposition to it. From this the communications staff can develop a plan on how to capitalize on the strengths and deal with the weaknesses. With a robust budget, polling and focus groups can be used. With limited funds, canvassing staff, family, friends, and even acquaintances can be used to assess arguments and to identify groups for and against the objective.

These quantitative and qualitative data help you decide how to articulate your messages and to whom to direct your proposals. Here are some of the steps: Establish well-defined, focused goals by deciding what you want to achieve by what time period—the end of a year, legislative period, or term in office. From your audit, develop a pithy major message. Ask yourself:

- ⇒ What goals do I want to achieve? Pick a realistic number—no more than five a year—on which to focus, and then break them down into what you would like to achieve this year, next year, and so forth.
- ⇒ What do I want to communicate and to whom?
- ⇒ Who are my audiences and what aspect of my objective will particularly catch their atten-

tion? What points will resonate with mothers, students, the elderly, military personnel?

- ⇒ When do I communicate each message? You might decide to emphasize a message a week. You could have submessages within an overall major message. For example, if improving education is your goal, you could have a major message: “An educated citizen is a smart citizen.” Your submessages could focus on topics of improving teacher training, involving parents more in the educational system, lengthening the school day or year, and so forth.
- ⇒ What media tools will you use? Ideally you would use all types of media, from traditional (print, broadcast) to Web-based and social media and mobile technology, targeting specific audiences with specific tools. For example, if you want to catch the attention of older women, targeting women’s magazines they read and television programs they view might be part of your plan. To reach younger audiences, it might be best to use social media and youth radio stations.

From your analysis, you can formulate a media campaign that you can use to educate people, influence public opinion, persuade opinion leaders, generate debate and inspire people to take an action.

“To communicate effectively, you must identify a need; prioritize what is most important; decide what you want to communicate; have it be relevant to your audience; and then repeat it,” said former Clinton White House spokesperson Dee Dee Myers. “You can’t say everything. You have to decide what is most important to say, focus on whom you are saying it to, and say it in terms that make sense to them. Then you have to repeat the message over and over, because people are busy and have a lot of information coming at them in a 24-hour news cycle.”

Working Out a Media Campaign

A media campaign is your plan to carry out your communications strategy. In working out an effective media campaign, you would:



TRY THIS

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN BEST PRACTICES

- ⇒ Work with top government officials to have clear goals and frequently reassess them.
- ⇒ Plan for how to assess the success or failure of your communications plan.
- ⇒ Coordinate with other departments and ministries to avoid surprises.
- ⇒ Work the message into everything that the government official does.

- ⇒ Have clear objectives.
- ⇒ Know the arguments for and against your policy goals.
- ⇒ Develop clear messages to which the public will respond about your policy goals. Have messages that are short, easy to understand, easy to explain and easy to remember.
- ⇒ Devise a strategic communications plan with a step-by-step campaign to carry it out.
- ⇒ Define your audiences. These may range from everyone in the population to small subpopulations you particularly want to reach with messages tailored for specific demographic characteristics (age or income, for example).
- ⇒ Plan all your media and map them out on a calendar. On what topic will your blog focus on Monday, on Tuesday, on Wednesday?
- ⇒ Decide who will deliver the various communications messages. For example, who will write the blog post on Monday, on Tuesday?
- ⇒ Break the plan down into assignments.
- ⇒ Write out a schedule of who does what and by what date, and update it frequently.
- ⇒ Appoint a supervisor to monitor the assignments to ensure that work is on schedule.
- ⇒ Change deadlines as needed.
- ⇒ Meet regularly with those involved in the plan—everyone from the press secretary to the chief of staff, the scheduler, the speechwriter and the legislative aide.
- ⇒ Approve the plan with the group.
- ⇒ Implement the plan.
- ⇒ Use events to reinforce the themes. Have a calendar of different media and messages and messengers laid out. For example, to gather attention to a particular event, you could assign people within your organization who are popular with stakeholders to blog, tweet and write op-eds on different themes on different days. You could produce videos and speeches that you would put on your and their Web pages and on YouTube.
- ⇒ Focus on the goals in speeches, blogs, your Web page and editorials.



TO THE POINT

COMMUNICATING WITH THE PUBLIC

Your communication with the public must be:

- ⇒ **Consistent:** Stay on message.
- ⇒ **Penetrating:** Put your message in terms people understand—human and local.
- ⇒ **Relevant:** People must care about it.
- ⇒ **Realistic:** Promise small and deliver big.
- ⇒ **Repetitious:** Create an “echo chamber.”
- ⇒ **Early:** People remember the first and last things they hear.

- ⇒ Target various subtexts of your message to your different audiences. Do you need to segment your messages by different audiences, such as primary and secondary target groups, key stakeholders, and your internal (or staff) audiences?
- ⇒ Have surrogates or outside experts communicate the same message related to your goals as you do. Add their participation to your activity calendar.
- ⇒ Be prepared to tell the public:
 - What the program is and what it is not.
 - Why it is needed.
 - How it will affect them.
 - What will happen in the short term.
 - What will happen in the long term.
 - How this is different from what is already happening.
 - What the government’s responsibility is in the new program.
 - What the timeline is and when changes will take effect.
 - What will happen if your goal is not achieved.
 - How the public will know if the program has been successful.
 - What action the public is being asked to take.

Repeat your message. Talk about what you are going to say, say it, and then talk about what you said.



Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker speaks with the press about job creation at the Ruud Lighting Plant. When holding press conferences, choose sites that amplify your message. © AP Images/Journal Times/Gregory Shaver



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Carrying Out the Media Campaign

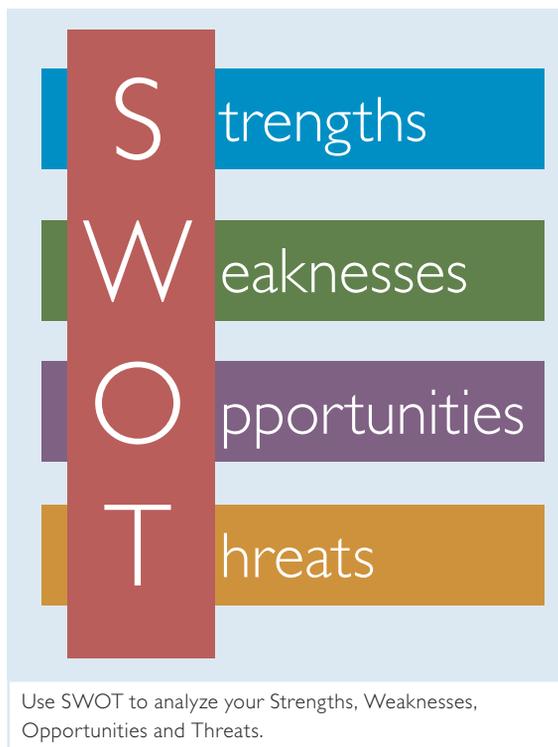
The success or failure of a strategic communications plan depends on your ability to carry it out in an orderly, focused, coordinated and yet flexible manner. You carry out the strategy in a media campaign and one of your most important tools to do so is the message you convey. What you don't want is a fragmented, muddled message. A successful communications effort involves setting clear, measurable objectives and developing messages to effectively convey them to defined audiences using the appropriate media. Here are some steps to consider.

Put major events on a master calendar. Look at the government official's calendar month by month and fill in major recurring events. In the United States, for example, the president gives a televised State of the Union address in January; soon after the proposed annual budget is released; major international meetings occur in the summer; and the United Nations General Assembly opens in the fall. These significant recurring events are linchpins in the White House media calendar in terms of annual repeating key events around which the president delivers messages.

Sometimes recurring events provide opportunities into which one of the government's objectives for the year can fit. For example, if one goal relates to increasing employment, it

could be addressed in the annual State of the Union address.

Map out periodic messages. After you fill in the "must do" events on the master calendar and any of your objectives that would fit into them, lay out the rest of your goals. This allows you to plan what you will talk about proactively during the times you do not have to engage in a "must do" event. For example, if in January the economy and increasing employment would be a major focus, in February another objective, such as improving the environment, might be addressed. In March, improving education could be tackled, and in April the government leader might turn again to the economy.



How often you alternate discussion of your objectives depends on a variety of factors, such as the size and complexity of an organization or the legislative calendar. For example, if agricultural reform, civil service reform and job creation were your three main issues and you decided on talking about an issue over a week, you might talk about agricultural reform one week, education reform the next, and job creation the next two weeks before and during your national labor day. During the four weeks, you would schedule different events each day or week around a topic and the fifth week return to a discussion of agricultural reform.

Develop a message and submessages. Your message should be short, easy to remember and easy to understand. You may develop three submessages from it, with each perhaps targeting a different demographic. Think of it like a tree trunk, or major message from which are branches or submessages. For example, if educational improvement is one of your three major messages, you may have submessages on teacher training, a longer school day and week, and increased parent involvement. The result might be:

Major message:

⇒ An educated New Yorker is a working New Yorker.

Submessages for targeted audiences:

⇒ For teachers: Well-trained teachers equal well-educated students.

⇒ For parents and teachers, promoting a longer school day and year: Learn longer, be smarter.

⇒ For parental engagement in education: An engaged parent is an educated child.

Add which week, day or month you will give what message or submessage to your master calendar. Write the message for each day, week, month or quarter on a calendar for at least six months in the future. Update the calendar frequently as unplanned events occur and legislative agendas and schedules change, causing you to adjust plans.

Make sure your messages and submessages are simple. Make sure that your message is simple, clear and direct. Write a tweet or headline to help you refine your message. Have no more than three submessages so you don't lose your audience. Then restate your points repeatedly.

Sometimes one strong message is enough. For example, "Drive sober or be pulled over" is sufficient to put out a message against drinking alcohol and driving.

Do an audit. Know how you are perceived by others and identify the arguments in favor of your plan and those that can be used against it. This will help you fine-tune your messages and address the arguments that will be used against you. Your budget will determine which techniques you use—polling, surveys or simply canvassing colleagues. The findings will help you develop messages advocating for your proposals and defending against arguments used to oppose them.

This is also called a SWOT analysis. That is, you are analyzing your Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

Identify your audiences. Decide whom you want to reach with your messages. Can the same message resonate with all citizens, or do you have several audiences, such as the elderly, students, or women, with each requiring a differently targeted submessage for best absorption?

Analyze your audiences. Ask: Who are your stakeholders or desired target audiences? Why are they important, what are the challenges or concerns of each audience, what or who influences them, and what do you want them to do: change attitude or behavior or both? Depending on the topic, you may need to divide audiences geographically by region, demographically such as by age, gender, income or religion, or psychographically by lifestyle or interests.

Research how your target audiences consume information. You want to know your audience’s knowledge gap—their current behavior, knowledge and attitudes, and how best to reach them on your theme. What type of media is appropriate to each audience? For example, a young audience likely uses digital and social media; an older audience may use more traditional media, such as newspapers and television. In many parts of the world, radio is a prime means of communication. You must engage people where they are.

Map the media. Maintain an up-to-date media list and review it to determine who would be most interested in getting information on your topic. What are their interests and what is the best way to reach them? This goes not only for traditional media such as newspapers, magazines and broadcast programs, but also for bloggers and videographers getting out messages in the digital age. Go to specialized media. If your objective centers on agriculture, contact not only political and economic reporters but also those interested in agriculture.

Ask yourself if your message is pertinent to your medium. Keep more complex information for print, and simpler information

for social media and videos. For example, a more complicated story would be told in print and a less complicated one in broadcast or social media. Connect with social media sites that might post and link your message. Create a special Facebook page on this topic. The goal is to reach your different audiences by the information sources they use and trust. Using audience research data can give you this information.

Decide on usage of marketing tools. Will you use pamphlets, billboards or logos and messages on hats and T-shirts? The combined impact of multiple communication elements—television, print, radio, Web pages, social media and marketing tools—is much greater than the sum of their individual impact.

Localize the story. Know how your program will impact different regions. Remember the adage: “All news is local news.” As much as possible, put your information in not only national but also local terms.

As political scientist Martha Kumar reported in *Managing the President’s Message*, when President Bill Clinton wanted to build interest in global warming, he invited local weather forecasters from around the country to travel to Washington to do their weather reports from the White House lawn. This helped reach audiences not interested in politics as typically covered from the White House and brought a local angle to the story.



TRY THIS

MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT

- ▮▮▮ Map out your year. Focus first on the major recurrent events.
- ▮▮▮ Fill in calendar with objectives.
- ▮▮▮ Develop a message and submessage for each goal. Pick the audiences and media for each message.
- ▮▮▮ Monitor and evaluate.

Use personal examples. Giving information on your objective through personal examples resonates with audiences. When President Barack Obama talked about his health care proposals, patients who would be positively affected by the program also gave their perspectives to reporters. Turning policy into people is effective.

Use visual impact. A picture is worth a thousand words. And the picture you project to an audience should also deliver your message. Select sites and backdrops for press conferences, interviews and events with good visual impact. Alternate your backgrounds. Don't deliver every message from behind a podium or desk, and don't just have a blank wall behind you. Make the background thematic to your topic. If you are talking about jobs, go to a factory with workers around you to deliver your message; if at a school, have schoolchildren stand around you.

Pick messengers. Determine what respected third-party allies can reinforce your message. If a government public liaison office exists, work with it to identify and engage favorable audiences to also push your message. For example, on the agricultural theme, to whom do farmers listen? Who will write op-eds, give speeches, write blogs or do short videos advocating your agricultural plan? Prepare talking points for supportive opinion-makers who will support your plan and influence public opinion.

Determine coordination. Coordinate your message with others in the government to create an orchestra of support. It is easier to get support for a program if all groups that could have some interest in the program are aligned with you.

Develop a social media plan. Add blogging dates and themes to your master calendar. Have a master plan of who will blog on what submessage of your campaign on what day. Plan a tweeting schedule. Know what messages will be pushed on Facebook and have a plan for posting on YouTube and other sites.

Develop a timeline. When must your goal be achieved? If it is a legislative vote, for ex-

ample, what is the timeline leading up to it? That will determine your timeline for achieving your goal.

Develop a budget for your campaign. Carefully calculate the potential costs. Decide how much you will spend on each element of the plan.

Build a monitoring and evaluation plan. What measurements will you use to determine if you are reaching your goals? What will determine success or failure?

Develop two calendars. One is a master message calendar laying out for the length of the campaign who is targeted through what media on which days by which messenger. The other is a work calendar, which is done in reverse from the end date of the campaign until the start of planning. On it you would decide such things as who will write the materials. When should drafts be completed? Which individuals must approve them and by what date? Establish deadlines for each stage and put these into a work calendar. Constantly review the calendars to be sure that deadlines are being met.

Launch and be flexible. After the media campaign is launched, stay flexible as you may need to adjust plans.

Assess. Evaluate monthly how you are doing and alter the schedule, message and calendar as needed. You can rate each news story about your objective: What key messages were included, which were omitted and what, if anything, was inaccurate? Also look at what media tools worked best, which journalists, bloggers or other prominent social media creators had the most favorable coverage, which spokespersons for your message were the most dominant, what prominence your message was given, and what third-party validators—or opponents—said about your issue. You can chart this numerically, ranking favorable, unfavorable and neutral messages. If needed, change plans and do better the next month.



TO THE POINT

EXAMPLE OF A MEDIA CAMPAIGN

August and September are traditionally “back to school” months, when the press and public are especially focused on education issues, giving the U.S. Department of Education an excellent opportunity to make news locally and nationally.

In his first swing, President Obama’s Secretary of Education Arne Duncan took a bus tour through two regions of the country: in the south, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama, and in the northeast, New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Maine. Called “Courage in the Classroom: Honoring America’s Teachers,” the goal was to amplify the Department of Education’s message of support for teachers. Among the topics were elevating the teaching profession, supporting highly effective teaching, reforming teacher evaluation, and fair pay.

The locations were picked to showcase variety—urban and rural schools, early childhood centers and universities. But the press strategy was traditional, mixed with use of social media.

A media advisory announced the different cities and stops. Daily there were national as well as targeted city-by-city advisories saying what would happen. The Department of Education’s RSS feed distributed advisories to the national and local press. Then there were daily press releases saying what had happened.

The secretary’s bus, which was wrapped in royal blue and had images of teachers, kids, the “Courage in the Classroom” message and the Department’s seal, became a prop. It was a ready-made backdrop for interviews and was featured prominently in news photos and TV news stories.

Duncan held press availabilities at almost every venue. At some stops he made formal speeches, and at others he simply visited and talked with teachers, students and others. He also had informal discussions and listening sessions. Nearly every event was open to the press. Members of the national and local press were invited to ride the bus with Duncan for a few hours or even a full day. Bloggers, including local bloggers, particularly those who wrote for teachers and parents, also got interviews.

The bus was outfitted with a table and couches that made one-on-one interviews convenient. Sometimes local elected officials or educators rode along and participated in the interviews.

For social media, the Department of Education’s studio crew shot photos and videos at every stop. They edited them, often in a minivan on the way to the next venue. The images were compressed and emailed to the department’s webmaster, who posted them on the Department of Education’s blog as well as to its YouTube site. Two Department of Education staff, both former reporters, posted to the department’s blog site at least once daily.

Two staff used Twitter to both advance Duncan’s events and provide real-time reports as they happened. The videos and blog entries were cross-posted to the secretary’s Facebook page. Facebook was also used to announce the scheduled tour stops and events.

The next year, it happened all over again in different parts of the country, and this time photos were posted on Flickr.



Vermont gubernatorial candidate Brian Dubie participates in a debate on radio station WVMT. Short, simple sentences work best for radio. © AP Images/Glenn Russell



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Tools of the Press Office

As a government communicator, think of yourself as an orchestra conductor with many instruments to lead for creating great sound. For loud bold music you would use as many instruments as would make the music harmonious; for a more solitary tone you might only conduct the violins. As a communicator, you too have many instruments—or tools—at your disposal. And just like the orchestra conductor, the instruments should sound good together or, depending on the script, sound well alone.

Part of the job of media “conductor” is to figure out what tools to use when. Doug Wilson, President Obama’s assistant secretary of public affairs at the U.S. Department of Defense, told *The Washington Post*, “The key to dealing with such a broad range of communication tools is to remember there is room for all of them to engage.”

He added, “A public affairs team of only people who deal with the print press makes no sense, just like a public affairs team of just people doing Twitter makes no sense. The key is to understand what can be done with each of those tools and figure out what the best combination is to achieve a particular goal.”

Media tools are constantly changing. Here are a few available to the Information Age “conductor.”

Biography may be given with a press release; it provides the professional record and accomplishments of a person being appointed to a new job, giving a speech or participating in an event.

Blogs are like digital op-eds in which individuals write their commentary or news on a topic. Blogs combine the strength of social media—the ability to be easily passed on, for example—with traditional print publishing. They often combine text, images and links to other blogs, Web pages and social media. Most are interactive, allowing visitors to leave comments and messages on the blogs.

Calendars—master and working—are used in media campaigns. The master message calen-

dar goes through the length of a campaign, laying out the message, the media to be used and the spokesperson for each day, week or month. The working calendar is done in reverse, from the end date of the campaign until the start of advance planning, breaking out each task to be completed with work assignments to carry it out.

Discussion forum or **Internet forum** is an online site where users can post messages in the form of a conversation. A moderator typically approves the messages before posting and the messages are at least temporarily archived.

Editorial boards are meetings between a newsmaker and the editor of a print or online publication's editorial page, editorial and opinion writers, and reporters from the news sections to discuss a topic. Major television and cable networks also have similar meetings. The editorial board can give a government official an opportunity to explain his or her ideas in depth, which can lead the media to a deeper understanding of the government's policies and often results in news stories, editorials, blogs and other editorial comment.

Email is a way to exchange digital messages from an author to one or many recipients.

Executive summary is a summary of a longer report so readers can quickly understand the main points without reading a lengthy document.

Expert list is sometimes compiled by a press office and given to reporters. The list should contain the names of individuals with their affiliations, phone numbers and email addresses so that reporters can easily contact them for interviews or background information on specific topics.

Facebook is one of the most popular social networking services where users can create a profile or community around a topic, post information, and exchange information among "friends" or interested parties. www.facebook.com

Fact sheet or **backgrounder** often accompanies a press release and provides detailed information on a topic. Running as much as several printed pages, the fact sheet often appears in a bullet format for each new fact.

Fan in social media is a follower or enthusiast of an organization or public figure. When you become a fan you will get news, photos and other updates from the organization, celebrity, public figure or followers' organization.

Feature story is a news story that is more narrative in its writing and is not hard news.

Flickr is a photo and video sharing website. www.flickr.com

Goal or **objective** is what you want to achieve within a usually defined period of time.

Interviews give officials a chance to talk, usually one on one, with a reporter and get their ideas across in a more in-depth manner than at a press conference.

Link refers to a hyperlink that readers typically can click on to be taken to a website with further information on the subject. You want to have easily accessible share buttons on your Web page and social media sites so that readers don't have to go through many steps to get additional information.

Media advisory alerts the media to an upcoming event and should include the key elements—who, what, when, where, why and how.

Message articulates the goal you want to achieve in a way that can be easily understood and remembered.

MMS refers to Multimedia Messaging Service, in which image, video and sound content can be sent to and from mobile phones.

Objective (see Goal)

Online chat is an online text-based communication that can go from one sender to one receiver or to many receivers. This is one way that officials can set a time and carry on an online conversation with many recipients.

Op-eds, opinion pieces, columns or **blogs** are used by newsmakers to express opinions and communicate their views directly to citizens.

Photo opportunities or **“photo ops”** are “opportunities” for memorable photos to be taken, usually with a politician or celebrity.

“Pitch” email, print or **online message** or **letter** pitches a story to a reporter. It summarizes why the sender thinks a story would be of interest and what the visuals might be.

Podcasts are digital media files, audio or video, that can be downloaded to be listened to or seen in the time frame a listener or viewer wants.

Press avails is short for press availabilities. They normally last 10 to 15 minutes and are much shorter and less formal than press conferences. Typically there is no opening statement; the official goes right to answering questions from reporters.

Press conference is an event where the media are invited to ask questions of an official. They typically are done in person or through a variety of video, phone or digital formats. They often begin with an opening statement by the official on a topic of interest.

Press packets or **media kits** contain several items on a single topic and are used to give background on an organization and to launch a media campaign. Typically they may include a press release, fact sheet, biographies and photographs of speakers, and any articles of interest. While the packet would be distributed to the media or the public, the materials in it are also typically put online for wider distribution.

Press release is written like a news article and is an account of your story told in one or two pages. It contains the “who, what, where, when, why and how” in the first two paragraphs, as well as contact information for further questions.

Proactive communication is initiative taken to actively push a message to the public.

Public relations audit is evaluating how the perception of the organization maps against the organization’s objectives. From it you can see if your strategies and methods are reaching their goals.

Questions are sometimes given by officials to reporters to spark their interest in a topic. Imaginative questions create curiosity.

RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication and refers to an RSS “feed” allowing senders to push out content they feel would be of interest to receivers who have signed up to get it automatically. RSS subscribers receive timely updates from preferred websites rather than having to search for information.

SMS is Short Message Service, a type of text messaging communication on mobile phones.

Social media are media that are both Web- and mobile-based for social interaction so that communities can be created and dialogue results.

Speeches are used to promote policies, unveil new programs, explain positions and build consensus.

Strategic communication is using a variety of elements from research measuring public attitudes and defining audiences to putting out sustained and consistent information, and coordination to communicate a



TRY THIS

TOOLS OF THE PRESS OFFICE

- ▶▶▶ Put out your information in every format—not just one.
- ▶▶▶ Use visuals.
- ▶▶▶ Write your message in short tweets or a headline. This helps you focus your message.
- ▶▶▶ Use social media and update regularly.
- ▶▶▶ Create a buzz with your materials.

concept or process to reach a long-term goal. It also requires monitoring and evaluation of the process.

Streaming media is media that is sent in real time so that viewers from different areas can see and hear a presentation as it is being given.

Twitter is a microblog of no more than 140 characters that allows users to send and read messages called tweets. They are text-based posts with links to photos, websites, videos and other material.

Visuals are pictures—still, video, graphs, charts and maps—that are put online or distributed in hard copy or in digital format.

Web pages are used by organizations to tell their own stories through visuals, audio and written content.

Webcast or **webchat** uses streaming media technology over the Internet to link one source of content, such as a speaker or an official, with people located all over the world. The official responds to questions and carries on a conversation.

YouTube is a video-sharing website where users can post, share and view videos. Organizations use it to post segments of officials' speeches and press conferences.
www.YouTube.com



TO THE POINT

VISUALS TELL THE STORY

A picture is worth a thousand words. Pictures can make information more interesting and engaging and make it easier for people to understand.

On television, the viewer should always be able to glean the essence of a story by looking at the picture on the screen when the sound is turned off. The same holds true of an article in a newspaper: It should be able to tell what the story is by the picture accompanying it.

Scott Sforza, who staged events for President George W. Bush, told a political scientist, “If the sound were turned down on the television when you are just passing by, you should be able to look at the TV and tell what the president’s message is.”

This can be done by having backdrops behind the speaker with the message, theme, logo or the organization or website name and address on it to get the message across. It also means having easily identifiable representatives of a theme—schoolchildren in uniforms for an education topic, for example—around a speaker. And if you don’t want to get a precise message across, stand in front of flags, books, plants or some interesting visual object to add visual diversity but not distraction. Never stand in front of a blank wall.

Putting visuals on your Web page and in your blogs is also important. Just as newspapers run pictures to enhance stories and to break up text, so should online and social media. Because audiences have shorter attention spans for online communication, good visuals are particularly important for newer media. Just as text for digital media needs to be briefer and livelier, so should Web pages and social media sites feature a mix of still and video images.



TO THE POINT

WRITING FOR RADIO

All over the globe, citizens are getting information from radio—commercial, public and community. Radio is listened to in areas where literacy rates are high, as well as in regions where literacy is low. Radio is heard on short wave, AM, FM, mobile devices and on the Internet. It is one of the world’s most popular and effective modes of communication.

Radio is intimate and immediate. By concentrating the audience’s attention on sound alone, radio can give listeners a sense that they are on the scene where the news is being made. Words heard over the radio—without visual aids—can show, announce, declare and describe something with expression and feeling and at the same time reflect the personality of the talker.

Writing for radio is different from writing for print and has been described as similar to writing song lyrics. Lyrics and radio scripts involve putting language in a visual form (writing it out) for communication in an oral form (singing or speaking). The writing must be brief and the sentences simple.

Writing for the ear requires different techniques than writing for the eye, as in print or video. Radio audiences mentally process broadcasts as they listen. On radio, there usually is no second chance; most radio broadcasts cannot be called back. Information must be communicated clearly, succinctly and concisely the first time. Words must be enunciated properly and be in concert with the type of information relayed.

While a print news story must describe who, what, where, when, why and how, radio—and video news, too—must have correctness, clarity, conciseness and color.

When writing for radio:

- ▣ Get the attention of the listener from the beginning.
- ▣ Write conversationally, but not too wordy.
- ▣ Avoid using too many numbers or statistics. Round numbers up or down, so 2,785 becomes “nearly 3,000.”
- ▣ Avoid abbreviations.
- ▣ Write with active verbs in the present tense as much as possible.
- ▣ Avoid extended descriptions.
- ▣ Do not repeat information that has been stated by the anchor in the lead-in.
- ▣ Use phonetic spelling for unfamiliar and hard-to-pronounce names and words. La Jolla, California, might be written “la HOY-a.”
- ▣ In a radio script, use all caps and double space.
- ▣ Keep it short: Three lines of copy is equal to about 10 seconds.



A newspaper vendor searches for customers on Seventh Avenue in New York City. Understanding what is newsworthy and why can help you get your message out. © AP Images/Mike Groll



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Written Materials

Most government press operations devote the bulk of their time and resources to putting out information on what the government is doing—its projects and plans—and responding to queries from the media. The advent of social media has not changed this. What has changed is the range of tools available to press offices for communicating with the public.

The traditional, written tool is the press release. Today the printed press release is augmented by new technologies such as the emailed release and social media release (SMR) that link to digital multimedia features, such as photographs, videos, podcasts, RSS feeds and other social bookmarking tools. Users also can post comments and have a dialogue with government officials.

No matter what the format, the press release remains a favorite tool for announcing government information.

“Press releases are good disciplinary tools because they encourage you to try to create the story you would like to see,” said a former press secretary. “If done clearly and simply, press releases improve accuracy. It is hard to misquote a press release.”

Press Releases

A press release is a summary of facts about a program or issue on which you want media

attention. It is presented in a standardized format. The main criterion for a press release is that it must contain news.

Similar to a straight news article, a press release is written in an inverted pyramid style. The first paragraph is the “lead,” and it contains the most important information; subsequent paragraphs expand on that information and give more detail in decreasing order of importance. The least important information is at the end.

Like a good news story, the good press release answers who, what, when, where, why and how. Who is the subject of the story? What is the story about? When is or was the event? Where is or was it happening? Why is the information important? How did it happen? All of these should appear in the first paragraph, sometimes the first two.

The sentences and paragraphs in a press release should be short so they can be quickly reviewed by an assignment editor or a reporter, and they should contain no jargon,

abbreviations, unexplained details or clichés. Quotations enhance a press release, but it is more usual to find quotes from top officials in the second or third paragraph. They are always attributed.

A press release that reads like a news story, without inflammatory adjectives, is more likely to be picked up by the press.

A press release that reads like a news story, without inflammatory adjectives, is more likely to be picked up by the press.

Typically, press releases in the United States follow a formula that includes:

- ⇒ Double spacing.
- ⇒ Plain stationery, preferably with the organization's logo, name and address at the top and phone number and Web and social media addresses at the bottom.
- ⇒ Wide margins—at least one inch (2.5 centimeters) around—provide for ease in reading and allow editors and reporters to write marginal notes.

The standard press release contains the following information at the top of the release:

- ⇒ The date the release is being put out.
- ⇒ A contact name, work and mobile phone numbers, email and social media addresses.
- ⇒ A release time. Often, news releases are sent in advance of an event but cannot be used until a specific hour so that reporters have time to read the material and process the information, particularly if it is a complicated story. If this is done, write “EMBARGOED UNTIL” and the date and specific time the news can be released. If the information can be used immediately, write “FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE.” For example, the White House typically releases an embargoed copy of the President's State of the Union address to reporters several hours before the President

addresses Congress and the nation so that they can study the content.

- ⇒ A headline, summarizing the news of the release; this should be attention-getting and put in capital letters.
- ⇒ A dateline, capitalized, beginning the first paragraph that states where the news originated.

In the United States, press releases usually run one to two pages. If there is more than one page, type “more” at the end of the first page. At the end of the release, type --30-- or ### to indicate the end. Be sure to check for spelling errors, typos, incorrect punctuation and poor writing.

Press releases typically are sent to the attention of an editor, an assignment editor or a reporter. Follow up on the press release with a phone call or email. Ask if the intended recipient got your release and would like additional information. Reporters today often receive them by email or linked through SMS and Twitter alerts. Press releases are also put out to the public on websites and through social media. Besides subject, they are also categorized by date.

The standard guidelines for the traditional press release also apply to the social media release; additional multimedia links must be relevant and enhance the subject of the release.

Press materials, such as press releases and fact sheets, should always be written and distributed before a news event such as a press conference, not afterwards. One new government found that out the hard way. Ministers stayed behind closed doors all night to develop a new economic plan. They concluded at 7 a.m. and alerted the media to an important press conference at 10 a.m. The ministers announced the new economic policies, and then the press staff began writing the press materials. Because the staff was so occupied with writing the press announcement, they did not have time to properly explain the new policies. For hours, the press had no written materials to work from in preparing what was a major and complicated



President Obama writes a press statement while his communications director, press secretary, associate director of speech writing and senior advisor wait in the background. *Official White House Photo by Pete Souza*

story, and some got details wrong. The government press office had to work for weeks to try to correct the misinformation.

Media Advisories

Typically, media advisories are used to announce an upcoming event on which you would like press coverage. They are similar to press releases in answering “who, what, when, where, why and how,” but they are shorter and intended to entice reporters to cover an event. In some countries, this information is sent in the form of an invitation. Since reporters are being targeted, a media advisory typically is not put on public Web pages for all to see. In the United States, they often go to reporters by email or via so-

Media advisories are used to announce an upcoming event on which you would like press coverage.

cial media with links to the advisory.

Media advisories are in the same style as a news release with the date, contact names, phone numbers, “FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE” or “EMBARGOED UNTIL” at the top, and with ### or --30-- to indicate the end of the release.

Fact Sheets

The fact sheet, or backgrounder, provides more detail than the press release by citing facts and figures, but not quotations, to embellish information on a press release. The fact sheet is presented in as readable a form as possible. It often has subtitles in bold type and is highlighted with bullets. The press release is like a news story; the fact sheet provides detail to enhance the story.

Like media advisories, fact sheets follow the format of a news release with “FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE” or “EMBARGOED UNTIL,” contact names and numbers, email and social media addresses, and an ending, such as --30-- . These, too, are put on websites so the public can have additional information.



TRY THIS

PRESS RELEASES

- Why is this important and how does this make news?
- What are the main points?
- What research is there to back up the information? Can it be checked easily if reporters ask to do so?
- Who can be quoted as an authority on the topic?
- What additional information, such as a fact sheet, is needed?

If interesting enough, press offices turn the information into blog posts. For example, if a transportation ministry announced a new highway, it might keep the topic going for several days by breaking down the information not only from the press release but

also the fact sheet to keep the topic—with links to the original documents—in the audience’s attention.

Officials in one government media office observed that reporters would come to a press conference, take materials, and leave before the press conference began. The spokesperson decided to distribute the materials after the press briefing in order to keep journalists there. This didn’t work. A number of journalists stayed for only part of the briefing, left early, and wrote stories from their notes. Sometimes, the press officers felt the reporters who left got it wrong. However, if the reporters had had the written material with the basic facts to pick up before the press conference, they likely would not have misinterpreted issues.

Journalists usually have a number of events to cover, and a spokesperson should not assume that if reporters stay for only part of a briefing they are not interested or will not write a story. Their schedules may preclude them from staying for an entire press event, particularly if a briefing runs



Former White House press secretary Tony Snow calls on a reporter during a daily briefing in the West Wing. Press releases help busy reporters get the facts. © AP Images/Pablo Martinez Monsivais

for more than an hour, as happened in this press office. If the reporters had had the written materials, either in hard copy or

emailed to them, chances are they would have referred to them while writing their stories later.



TO THE POINT

WHAT MAKES NEWS?

Your news isn't interesting just because you say it is. Too often officials criticize the media for not running the stories they want them to run. Yet, when you ask journalists why they didn't, their answer usually is that the "story" was not interesting, timely or important.

Understanding what is newsworthy helps you get news coverage.

"Good news stories usually don't make good news. They are not interesting," admitted the public affairs chief of a U.S. government agency.

One way to get attention for your story is to tie your information to important ongoing stories or the hot news story of the day. Another technique is to use special events or holidays as a hook to your news. For example, in the winter the head of a nonprofit educational organization released a survey on college students' knowledge of American history. It got no coverage. He re-released it on July 4, hooking the findings to the U.S. national day. This time the press attention was enormous.

What makes news?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▣ Events close to home—or news that can be translated into local terms. As the old saying goes, "All news is local news." ▣ Controversy and conflict. ▣ Timeliness. News today is up to the second. ▣ Impact—something that impacts a number of people. ▣ Personal turnarounds or dramatic reversals of fortune. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▣ Prominent people. ▣ The unusual. "Dog bites man" isn't newsworthy. "Man bites dog" is. ▣ A current issue or hot topic. The 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami that damaged nuclear power reactors resulted in many news organizations worldwide doing stories about nuclear-plant safety in their countries. |
|--|--|



President Obama speaks with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg at a town hall meeting on the economy. Governments can use social media to solicit citizens' opinions. © Getty Images/Justin Sullivan



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Web Pages and Social Media

“If you are not communicating with social media, you are leaving a growing part of the population out of the conversation,” said Anita Dunn, former White House communications director for President Obama. “It is not social media versus the conventional press. These are not competitive channels. It is an additive process.”

Yet, Dunn added, if you only communicate through social media, “you leave out a significant part of the population. And if you communicate only through traditional media, you leave out a significant amount of the population.”

That is why governments increasingly are communicating on all platforms.

What it is, said Dana Perino, former White House press secretary to President George W. Bush, is being “platform agnostic, as well as fairly quick in replying to any news development or political attacks.”

Web pages, social media and mobile technology hold great potential to enhance communication between governments, journalists and citizens. Government communicators can get more information out faster to more reporters, who now can be in a virtual rather than physical press room to receive it.

Governments can use tweets and blogs to clarify information, deal with rumors and

counter falsehoods and misinformation. Governments can present their information, pictures and videos directly to the public, without going through the filter of the news media. They can directly solicit opinions of citizens and get their suggestions on programs.

Some government officials say that social media tools are helping them do a better job. The communications manager for Franklin, Tennessee, blogged that citizens’ comments have helped city officials make decisions. “City and country governments can use social media not only to push information to the public, but also use the feedback to determine public perceptions, identify problem areas, get insights into the city’s audience and, most important, build a

dialogue with the citizens you serve.” She added: “We can’t be right 100 percent of the time, and these comments can help us all improve.”

But it is important to remember that the Web and social media are nothing more than tools.

“Previously we thought of traditional media, social media and the Web as being different,” said a long-time government communicator. “Now we see them as one thing. They are tools. There is not a different message for a different tool. Rather it is one message using different tools to reach different audiences.”

“The Web drives coverage, and the need to present a unified message across many platforms is here to stay,” Dunn said.

“The days of monologue have ended. If you are not engaged in dialogue—and this is true for any institution, universities, retail, everyone—if you don’t invite people to talk to you, they have a lot of places they can go and talk about you.”

Social media doesn’t change the relationship or interaction with reporters; it just increases it. Often journalists are the first users of government social media. That is what Memphis Light, Gas and Water, a public utility, found when it launched its Twitter feed without much fanfare.

Over the first weekend, the feed picked up 20 followers—mostly journalists. The number of followers has grown significantly, but some of the biggest fans remain journalists. “They use it for breaking news and for story tips,” the utility communicator said.

Social media have enhanced the appetite for news. “Because stories are posted at any time, the secretary and the department news staff need to be much more available to the media,” said one Cabinet-level communicator. “Because of the 24/7 appetite for news, plus the emergence of online and social media, we have a variety of new ways to make news. Today even small news stories and small announcements get covered.”

The mix of traditional and newer media allows for a breadth of communication.

“When we had a *Wall Street Journal* article,” this communicator said, “we posted it on the website, cross-posted it to let the world know. We put it on our website, did an RSS feed about it, tweeted, put it on our Facebook page and even wrote a blog [post] with links.” This allowed them not only to get the word out about the positive piece but also allowed others to send it on to friends—the amplifier effect.

“The Web drives coverage, and the need to present a unified message across many platforms is here to stay.”

Increasingly government and political figures are breaking news on mobile and social media. Presidential candidate Barack Obama announced Senator Joe Biden as his vice presidential running mate by communicating “directly” with voters who had provided their email and text addresses. The White House Press Office has broken news, such as a delay in a presidential trip, on Twitter. President Obama has taken questions in a town hall meeting on Facebook, and some political candidates have announced their campaigns on that social network.

The Obama administration has made social media a hallmark of its operations, not just at the White House but all across government. Before he left the White House, press secretary Robert Gibbs hosted a number of “First Question” sessions on Twitter, in which he took questions from the public. After the State of the Union address, the White House hosted live Facebook chats with senior policy advisers and a YouTube interview with President Obama. Not only did reporters get news from these interchanges, the sessions also served as direct links between the government and the public.

“Obviously a number of us use different types of social media like Twitter

to communicate what the government is doing to the people in this country,” Gibbs told the *Roll Call* newspaper. “I think it is just another way of bringing people a little closer to the decisions that get made here and why.”

Social media are also listening tools for government officials to get ahead of public concerns. One U.S. department frequently posts questions on a blog and invites the public to contribute answers. “We have run competitions, video contests, where the public can post their entries on YouTube,” a media specialist said.

Heightened Expectations

A federal government communicator noted that while social media provides more interactivity, it also means an expected quicker response. “By using social media you are raising expectations that you are available, that citizens can come faster to you, the government, that information will be kept current, and that if there is a problem, you the government can find a solution and answer quickly.”

While this could make some more cautious about engaging, he warned you do this at your peril. “If you do not engage, the media—and citizens—will get information in another way.”

Potential negative comment is one of the biggest concerns. “Our agency heads were afraid that someone might say something bad about the agency,” one national communications director said. “But someone could comment negatively at a party. Our rule of thumb to employees is to say in a blog or a tweet what you would say if you were standing behind a platform with the agency’s logo.”

Social Media and Staffing

Other concerns are related to staff time and funding. Adding a Web page and engaging in social media doesn’t necessarily mean you will need additional staff or funding. It can mean shifting duties or adding one more

expert. And it can cut costs, especially in postage, some governments have found.

Before it started using social media, the communications office in one small federal agency had a 12-person communications staff, which was already handling content for a Web page. When blogging, the use of Facebook and other social tools were launched, only one person was added and assignments were shifted, with some staff working with reporters from print and broadcast outlets and others working on social media, video and audio and the website. Everyone works on the quarterly print magazine. Staff members throughout the agency are tapped to write blog posts and contribute in their areas of expertise to the website. These are edited by the public affairs staff.

As in all communications, having consistency across government is important. To come up with guidelines across the government, the Federal Web Managers Council, an interagency group of senior federal government Web and new media managers, was created. Its goal is to “share common challenges, ideas, and best practices and improve the online delivery of U.S. government information and services.”

“Government needs to take our content to where people already are on the Web, rather than just expecting people will come to government websites,” wrote Rachel Flagg, Web Council co-chair. At <http://www.howto.gov>, the Web Council has excellent information on setting up, managing and evaluating websites and social media sites.

How To: Social Media

- ⇒ Decide why you want to use these tools. Have a strategy.
- ⇒ Define your audiences. Know whom you want to reach.
- ⇒ Get the leaders involved. Without the enthusiastic buy-in of the top officials, succeeding with social media will be difficult at best.
- ⇒ Have the communications or press office lead the effort. They are the content peo-

Rachel Flagg, one of the co-chairs of the Web Council, wrote that the group's goals are to ensure that when citizens need government information and services online, they are able to:

- Find with ease relevant, accurate and up-to-date information.
- Understand information the first time they read it.
- Complete common tasks efficiently.
- Obtain the same answer from every service channel (Web, phone, email, print, in person, etc.).
- Provide feedback and ideas and hear what the government will do with them.
- Access critical information if they have a disability or aren't proficient in English.

ple; don't leave the job to the technicians—the IT staff. Build a team across departments, led by communications.

- ⇒ Establish policies, procedures and standards. Write a strategy for your use of social media.
- ⇒ Encourage comments. But write your guidelines for comments and post them on the site. For instance, one federal agency states on its site that no obscene or profane comments, nor any with personal attacks or promoting commercial projects, can be posted. "Other than that, we post it," an official said.
- ⇒ Decide who will curate your Web and social media platforms, approve agency content and respond to posts.
- ⇒ Make a calendar to cover date, type of content and social platforms to be used, and who can use it. For example, on each day of the week, what will be the content on blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and who will post them and respond to comments.
- ⇒ Keep the writing punchy and concise. "We have found that people's attention span is shorter with social media," one government official said. "You have to tell the story faster. Writing has to be crisp."
- ⇒ Plan how you will publicize your social media. Consider doing a press release, informing stakeholders, and using word of mouth—staff telling friends and family. Cross-post an announcement on other media platforms. Tell the traditional media. Media love stories about media—even social media.
- ⇒ Be innovative. Some government agencies are putting their Web and social media sites on bills and even announcing them on phone on-hold messages.
- ⇒ Make it easy to share. Have icons that can be clicked to share your social media sites in different formats, such as by emailing or posting to the reader's Facebook site. The easier it is to forward a blog post or story, the greater the odds your message will be amplified.
- ⇒ Make sure you are in compliance with open records and "sunshine" laws. This may require you to keep copies of blog posts, responses and email messages. Consult your legal counsel.
- ⇒ Measure to determine if you are meeting your goals. Measure how much traffic you get to your site as well as the number of repeat visits. How many have shared your site or "friended" you? And where have they come from?
- ⇒ Protect confidentiality and proprietary information.
- ⇒ Add links to your email signature so that every time you email, or blog, the receiver can link to your social media sites.

How To: Websites

- ⇒ Develop a statement of purpose for your website. Develop your site around the questions citizens ask when they call or email. If your website serves a number of audiences, you may need to have different websites.
- ⇒ Ensure that new content does not duplicate what already exists. If other government agencies have similar information, work together to have a single source of the data. As the Web Council states, "Content should be posted once by

“People’s attention span is shorter with social media. You have to tell the story faster. Writing has to be crisp.”

agencies with the greatest expertise and used by other agencies and portals through links.”

- ⇒ Create cross-agency sites for particular information. An example is a site with information for seniors to which several government agencies might contribute information and with links to agencies and nongovernmental services. You don’t want citizens to have to search website by website to get information on a topic on which several agencies work.
- ⇒ Use official government domain names. Visitors to your site should be confident they are getting official government information. As the Web Council points out, many websites may resemble a government’s and appear to provide official government information, but do not. This can lead to the public receiving erroneous data.
- ⇒ Have your agency’s name on every page. This is important, as users may not always come through the “front door” but enter through back pages.
- ⇒ Assign a curator to each Web page if your government agency has several.
- ⇒ Write in plain, simple language. Put the most important content first.
- ⇒ Review and update your content regularly, and use dates so users know when it was last updated.
- ⇒ Organize your content by subject, service, audience or geographical location so users can get information quickly.
- ⇒ Have a home page that sends users in the right direction. It should communicate basic information. Users want quick and efficient service; if your home page is ineffective, they won’t come back.

- ⇒ Post a contact page of how to reach government officials. Also list: forms, frequently asked questions, employment information, maps, addresses and organizational information.
- ⇒ Link. Focus on creating content related to your mission and use links to related topics. If linking to a nongovernment website, users should know they are going to a site that is nongovernmental.
- ⇒ Review and update your links regularly. Dead links will drive your audience away.
- ⇒ Make your site easy to use. People need to be able to get the information for which they can search quickly and easily.
- ⇒ Be careful about posting advertising on your site. Citizens expect the government to be impartial and not show favoritism to a particular product or business. If you don’t have specific authority to advertise, don’t.
- ⇒ Develop a process to identify and archive content that is no longer relevant or useful.

A blog is a conversation—a dynamic tool for government officials to communicate their thoughts, opinions and information directly to the public.

- ⇒ Measure how you are doing. Post a short questionnaire for your visitors.
- ⇒ Evaluate on an ongoing basis whether and how your website is helping to achieve your agency’s mission.
- ⇒ Provide your staff with basic training on writing for the Web and social media.

How To: Blogs

A blog is a conversation—a dynamic tool for government officials to communicate their thoughts, opinions and information directly to the public. Blogs should create greater transparency and engagement with citizens and allow additional ways to present infor-

mation. They are easy and cheap: You write as you would speak.

Blogs can be delivered through email and RSS feeds, collected into email digests, put on websites and shared on other social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. With a blog, you can have a two-way conversation and learn what the public's needs are, and you can tell them how they are being addressed.

Anyone can blog. Many journalists do. One U.S. Department of Defense official commented, "Many 'blogs' are done by professional journalists and have a lot of credibility and traffic, and others are written by specialists, who have a deep knowledge about a topic and are followed by journalists or people in the government, and others are written by random people who may just be venting.

There is not one typical blogger."

Allow feedback. Posting citizen comments shows that government officials value the public's opinion. "If you only run lovely things, it does not feel authentic and direct," said an agency public affairs chief. "We don't want a totalitarian state with just one point of view."

Another government official advised to view blog comments like the letters-to-the-editor section in a newspaper, and to have clear guidelines on what you will or will not run. For this agency, nothing obscene or profane, nothing that promotes a commercial product and no personal attacks can be put online.



U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan shoots a video with students during a media campaign to amplify the department's message of support for teachers. Videos are a great way to put a human face on a policy initiative. © AP Images/Michael Conroy

- ⇒ Have a goal. Know why you want to blog.
- ⇒ Post to the blog at least two to three times a week so you don't lose your audience.
- ⇒ Update frequently and with regularity. Be consistent in your updating. Your readers will expect it.
- ⇒ Decide who will post to the blog. Have a byline so the public knows the authors. The site moderator should supervise postings.
- ⇒ Plan your topics. Know how they will help fulfill your agency's mission.
- ⇒ Develop a calendar. Have a calendar of topics, ideas and authors. It should cover at least one to two months ahead. This helps you have a content strategy and also keeps your posting consistent. At the same time you must be flexible, as current events can change focus.
- ⇒ Identify your audiences. You must know whom you want to reach, why and what you want to say to them. What is the information they would want to know? At the U.S. Department of Education, for example, the information that kindergarten through high school teachers want to know is likely different from what university professors want to know and from what parents may be interested in. The department has different blogs for different audiences.
- ⇒ Use attention-getting headlines to draw the reader in. Headlines may be read in many formats—RSS readers or news portals that aggregate content. Make them informative and pithy.
- ⇒ Post only up-to-date, well-written, interesting content. Write short. Keep sentences and paragraphs brief so you don't lose your reader. Don't use government jargon. Surveys have shown that online readers' and viewers' attention spans are short online. Give them the maximum of information with the minimum of words.
- ⇒ Write in pyramid style. Like a press release, you should have the most important news first and add the details in later paragraphs. The hard-news story format of "who, what, when, where, why and how" should be in your first two paragraphs.
- ⇒ Be conversational.
- ⇒ Be timely and relevant.
- ⇒ Include keywords. This way your blog posts will be picked up more readily in web searches.
- ⇒ Promote your blog and link to your press releases, speeches, videos, pictures and interesting articles about your issues and to your social media sites.
- ⇒ Use links in your blog. The first link is the one most people click on, so have it be your most important one. Don't have too many links too close together.
- ⇒ Post both positive and negative comments. Have a curator/editor read and approve what is posted online. Requiring responders to put their name may cut down on unruly comments.
- ⇒ Images, visuals, bullet points, lists and subheads help make blogs more accessible.
- ⇒ Archive. Regularly save your blog posts and readers' comments.

How To: Video

Videos are multisensory experiences that can make a story very real and very immediate. They can put a human face on a policy initiative and translate a complicated concept into simple terms. Videos can take dense information and make it more accessible. Posting instructive videos to explain how to do certain governmental tasks, such as filling out a government form or applying for a benefit, is particularly effective. Most U.S. government communicators use YouTube when they post video.

- ⇒ Know why you are doing the video. Reasons may include wanting to inform, entertain or demonstrate something. Ask why someone would rather watch what you have to present than hear it or read it.
- ⇒ Write a short description of what the video is about; what you want your audience to take away from it; and what verbal content and visual cues you will have. This will help you clarify the purpose of the video.

- ⇒ Open with an eye catcher as viewers typically scan the first few seconds to see if it is worthwhile.
- ⇒ Begin your video with a logo and title card of your agency.
- ⇒ Have more than one scene. Don't get stuck on one image or a talking head.
- ⇒ Make sure your video has some movement, such as an interview that is back and forth, or action-oriented. Have someone doing something. Information presented in a static format is not interesting on video.
- ⇒ Edit longer material, such as speeches, into smaller packages and post them in smaller segments on YouTube.
- ⇒ Keep your video short—no longer than three to five minutes.
- ⇒ Get permission to video people or places or to use music.

Twitter can be extremely effective for emergency and rapid response communications.

- ⇒ Put your agency's name, logo and other identifying materials on your YouTube page.
- ⇒ Embed videos on your website.
- ⇒ Transcribe your video and put it on your website with a link to the video. This makes it easy to search.
- ⇒ Curate comments as you would with blogs.

How To: Twitter

With its 140-character maximum, Twitter, a microblog, allows for speedy information to be read online or be sent as a text message to a mobile device. The information can then be redistributed or “retweeted” to others, thus making it more widely distributed than through traditional media channels.

Twitter can be extremely effective for emergency and rapid response communications—both to send out information on resources in a crisis and to get information on people need-

ing help. As the Massachusetts Office of Administration and Finance said in its online Twitter toolkit, “Sometimes, failure to engage on Twitter will lengthen the duration of the crisis, because only the problem, and not your solution, are being ‘retweeted.’”

Twitter also can be a great way to have a conversation with citizens. By searching tweets you can also do a “crowd source” of issues or concerns and find out what citizens are thinking about a particular policy. Tweeted questions are a great way to test ideas with people and stay ahead of media inquiries.

By using hashtags—also known as microblogging funnels—you can direct readers to specific content. For example, #TOPIC would direct the user to a particular topic. Attendees at a meeting could be directed to a hashtag so that all tweets related to that event can be easily searched and retrieved.

A Twitter RSS feed can be established so that information on particular topics goes directly to the receiver without his or her having to search for the information.

- ⇒ Be compelling. With their 140-character limit, effective tweets have to be short and attention catching.
- ⇒ Be conversational. Don't use jargon or government-speak.
- ⇒ Tweet three to 10 times a day.
- ⇒ Tweet about your press releases, statements and speeches and link to the full document on your Web page.
- ⇒ Be transparent. Disclose who is writing the tweet and how the public can reach the person tweeting.
- ⇒ Count your followers. That is one way to see how popular you are on Twitter.
- ⇒ Respond to comments and mentions on Twitter. If you get a lot of tweets on the same topic, you could use another medium, such as YouTube, to respond.
- ⇒ Ask questions. Hashtags “#” can keep the topics separate.
- ⇒ Respond quickly or people will think you don't want to engage.
- ⇒ Retweet messages that relate to your topic.
- ⇒ Promote your Twitter account. Put a link

on your Web page, your blog and your YouTube account and cross-link from your Twitter account to these.

- ⇒ Link to your home page in your Twitter profile so followers can see that your account is authentic.
- ⇒ Consider messages sent and received on Twitter to be public records and keep copies.

How To: Photos

Photos help people better understand your content and make information more interesting and engaging. Photo-sharing sites such as Flickr allow users to share and manage photo and video content and can raise awareness of your agency's activities by using photos and video. As the Web Council states, "Allowing users to interact with your content on Flickr is a great way to engage constituents, draw attention to your services, and generate goodwill."

"Allowing users to interact with your content on Flickr is a great way to engage constituents, draw attention to your services, and generate goodwill."

In the U.S. government, the Library of Congress with its huge photographic collection has been particularly successful putting pictures, particularly historical ones, online. The Environmental Protection Agency gets citizens involved in its mission of protecting the environment and health by having citizens share their pictures in Flickr groups. The White House makes official photographs available for publication by news groups on Flickr.

- ⇒ Decide what your objectives are in using a photo-sharing site.
- ⇒ Define your audiences and ask if your agency will benefit by having them find and see your content. Ask if all should be public or

some restricted to particular audiences.

- ⇒ Decide what can be shared and printed and what can be commented on.
- ⇒ Give titles to your photos and include key words describing the content so that it can be picked up in a search.
- ⇒ Determine the copyright status of your content and how others can use it.
- ⇒ Measure success by the number and type of Flickr contacts you have received, comments that have been added, referrals made, and increased traffic to related content on your website.

How To: Facebook

"Sometimes wonderful contributions come on your Facebook. Somebody makes a post and it clicks some idea in your mind and you think, bingo, you can resolve some important issues for your people," said Ghana's vice president, John Dramani Mahama.

That is what Facebook does: lets you get the pulse of what citizens are thinking. "The massive popularity and time that people spend on Facebook makes it an ideal channel for us to disseminate health messages," said the social media specialist at the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Think of a lake with a stone thrown in it creating ripples in expanding circles. One person passes along information to another and it just expands out. Ultimately you are creating a community around a topic.

"People are looking to connect with authentic sources of information so they can stay informed," a Facebook trainer told participants at a Federal Web Council workshop. "If you are authentic, posting interesting content and informing them and connecting with them ...they are going to share that information and contribute back to you. It's going to create a positive feedback loop."

Governments are using Facebook in many ways—to get out information and to connect people around communities of interest. At the CDC, for example, citizens help government officials find solutions to health issues.

At the U.S. Department of Education, Facebook users put questions to the secretary of education, and every few weeks he does a video response that is put on the Facebook page and cross-linked with blogs. A county near Washington caught a man wanted for burglary after posting the suspect's photo on its Facebook page. Facebook fans sent in tips. Federal departments and the White House often reach out to fans to respond if they like or dislike something or to contact Congress on issues. When the Federal Aviation Administration had to furlough air traffic controllers after political disagreements over the U.S. debt, it used Facebook to share stories of those affected by the furloughs.

- ⇒ Determine your objectives.
- ⇒ Define your audience. Is it the general public or specialized audiences?
- ⇒ Decide if you will have one main page or different pages for different audiences. The CDC has a generalized page and others for special issues, such as health campaigns, teenage safe driving and emergency preparedness.
- ⇒ Do a new Facebook page if your information would require relevant updates, you can post material daily, your topic would engage an audience, you have the staff to manage the access, and the life of your event, campaign or topic is long-term. Otherwise link from your general page.
- ⇒ Appoint a curator for each page.
- ⇒ Develop a schedule. Post one to four times a day, and space postings out. Don't bunch them all at the end of the day.
- ⇒ Determine your comment and privacy policies for each Facebook page or group. Post your policies.
- ⇒ Allow comments. Many have found that comments police themselves. The CDC has discovered, for example, that often users will point fans who have posted incorrect material to the correct information. One reason there are fewer negative comments, the curator of a federal Facebook page argued, was that responders must use their real name and photo, which makes them more responsible. In its social media guidelines, the CDC states, "Removal of comments that are inaccurate or opinionated but not in violation causes lack of trust in the site and has proven to be a practice that encourages backlash by the community."
- ⇒ Have a disclaimer on your Facebook wall that says comments posted are not the views represented by the ministry.
- ⇒ Post responses to comments within 24 hours.
- ⇒ Draft a possible response in advance of posting on a controversial topic that may prompt emotional replies.
- ⇒ Keep a positive tone and encourage the reader to take action or get more information.
- ⇒ Have links to other social media resources such as YouTube, blog posts and other sites.
- ⇒ Brand your pages. Have an overall recognizable logo that can be on each page you create.
- ⇒ Evaluate. Measure the number of fans (active fans, new fans) and their demographics.
- ⇒ Track your click-throughs to see how many people go on to your website or other designated sites for information.
- ⇒ Brief your boss on the Facebook page and have him or her contribute. There's nothing worse than the boss being told by people how much they like the page and the boss having no idea what they are talking about.
- ⇒ Remember that a Facebook page is different from an individual Facebook profile. The former is for organizations and businesses and the latter for individual profiles. Facebook pages do not have an inbox or messaging capabilities; a profile is for a real person. Pages are for organizations and are optimized for larger-scale audiences.



TO THE POINT

SOCIAL MEDIA VS. E-GOVERNMENT

Social media is not e-government. Don't confuse the two. As the publication *Making the Most of Social Media: 7 Lessons from Successful Cities* points out, "The archetypical e-government application is a Web portal, an authoritative one-stop shop for citizens and businesses to access government information and services." In short, e-government is one-way communication.

"In contrast, social media and Web 2.0 applications (interactive, two-way communication) emphasize interactivity, co-creation of content, subscription-based information services and third-party application development," the study states.

"Governments who struggled to draw the public to one comprehensive Internet portal are finding they may gain more by pushing their information out to the many channels already inhabited by the public: traditional, social and mobile."



A visitor walks past an e-Government exhibition in Munich, Germany. Unlike social media, e-government is typically a one-way portal for citizens to access government services. © AP Images/Uwe Lein



Former Utah Governor Jon Huntsman announces his intention to run for president during a press conference in New Hampshire. Press conferences help connect citizens with government. © Corbis/Michael Seamans/Demotix



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Press Conferences

Press conferences bring together members of the media and one or more government officials in a question-and-answer session. Press conferences offer a chance for citizens to question government officials through the media. They give government officials the opportunity to take their messages to the people. The most effective communicator is always the government head.

“When you have press conferences on a regular basis, they allow for steam to be released,” said a former high-level government spokesperson. Pressure builds to get questions answered, and press conferences are an effective method, but there must be news to be made. “Think of why you are doing it and what will come out of it,” he added.

Press conferences are conducted in a variety of ways—in person at a location selected by the government official, by phone or webcast, via social networks like Facebook, or in special phone or online conferences just for bloggers. They usually begin with the government official making an opening statement, followed by reporters’ questions.

Before the Press Conference

The first step in setting up a press conference is to be sure there is news. For the head

of a country, this is rarely a problem. For the head of a small government agency, attracting the press can be more difficult. Reporters don’t like spending time on what they consider a non-event when they have other news competing for their attention. Among the steps to take in setting up a press conference:

- ⇒ Determine the topic of the conference and whether the topic is truly news.
- ⇒ Decide if the news you have is important enough—sufficiently newsworthy—to attract an adequate number of reporters, or whether a press release, fact sheet, blog post, Facebook or YouTube post, or other communication such as an email would convey the news adequately enough for a reporter to write a story.
- ⇒ Determine what format the press conference will take: in person, by phone, by webchat or through social media with

Some press offices keep responses on key topics on their computers and update them frequently so that material does not have to be newly written each time.

questions coming in from Twitter, Facebook or SMS.

- ⇒ Decide what the government official will say in his or her opening statement.
- ⇒ Write talking points or an opening statement and, as in an interview or speech, include no more than three points.
- ⇒ Identify possible questions that might be asked and appropriate responses. These need to go beyond the intended subject of the press conference since reporters likely will ask questions on other issues. Some press offices keep responses on key topics on their computers and update them frequently so that material does not have to be newly written each time.
- ⇒ Stage a mock press conference the day before the actual event, especially if the government official is uncomfortable responding to potential questions or the press conference is expected to be particularly difficult or controversial. Have the press office staff and other key government officials pretend to be reporters and ask questions of the official. This allows both official and staff to become aware of potential gaps in their responses. For ultimate effectiveness, videotape the mock press conference and play it back so the official can see how he or she did.
- ⇒ Pick the date and time for the press conference carefully. Check the event against the long-term calendar of other government offices to ensure there are no conflicts with other news events that day. When newspapers and television dominated, mid-morning or early afternoon were the best time for a press conference because of the various news deadlines. Today news is covered around the clock, but these traditional times often hold.
- ⇒ Choose a location that is accessible and can meet the technical requirements of the media, if the press conference occurs in person as opposed to over the phone or online. The site should be visually attractive and enhance your message. For instance, if agriculture is the topic, pick a farm as a backdrop. If it is education, consider a school or library.
- ⇒ Think visually. Picture ways to enhance your message. If you are announcing a government campaign, do you have a motto or short theme that can be projected in a backdrop behind you? At a minimum have your emblem or flags behind the official.
- ⇒ Decide whether to use charts or graphs to amplify your message. Have them next to the official so that television cameras can include them. Send these electronically, and also put them in press packets so reporters can refer to them as the story gets written and packaged. Put the visuals on your website and social media pages and blog and tweet about them.
- ⇒ Decide who will introduce the government official at the press conference and who will conclude the session. Will the official or someone else, such as the press secretary, point to reporters to take questions?
- ⇒ Set up a Twitter hashtag so reporters can tweet to the site just for the press conference and others can see the messages.
- ⇒ Video stream and record the event, if technically possible, so the public not attending the press conference can see it. Post the video on your website later.
- ⇒ Notify reporters. Besides those who cover the official regularly, expand the list of reporters, depending on the topic. For example, if the government official is the prime minister and the intended story is on the environment, notify environmental reporters in addition to the political reporters who normally cover your office.
- ⇒ Contact reporters a day or two before

the press conference to remind them of the event. Try to get an idea of who will come to the conference, or who will call in or be on the webcast. Getting a count will help you decide on the room size.

- ⇒ Let all legitimate journalists attend. Don't restrict the press.
- ⇒ Put the announcement of the press conference on a news wire service calendar.
- ⇒ Send a text message, email or fax to out-of-town press who may be interested in the topic but are unable to attend the press conference.
- ⇒ Allow time for the writing, printing, assembling, faxing and online posting of any press materials, such as press kits, press releases, backgrounders, biographies and photographs.

Videotape the mock press conference and play it back so the official can see how he or she did.

- ⇒ Manage all the technical requirements of the press. Arrange for lighting platforms, special power, translation, and mult boxes (audio equipment that has a single input and multiple outputs that go to recording devices). Make certain that anything that will be used works.
- ⇒ Assign a staff member to manage the logistics of the conference. On the day of the event, he or she should be at the site well in advance and should be prepared to handle unexpected logistical problems, such as outside noise and bad weather if it is an outdoor event.

If the Press Conference Is Off-Site

- ⇒ Decide if you need a holding room or hospitality suite for the government official.
- ⇒ Have adequate space for the technical needs of reporters.
- ⇒ Have the names, mobile phone numbers,

text addresses, email and Twitter addresses of key people at the site, such as the head of security, the maintenance superintendent and public relations staff.

Although the press conference may be held off-site, it is still imperative to plan all aspects of the event as thoroughly as you would on your home turf. Things can and do go wrong. For example, one government official traveled several hours to dedicate a new hospital facility. He and his press secretary knew he would take press questions after the dedication, but they neglected to arrange for a place where this could occur. The official wound up giving a press conference for 15 reporters in a hospital hallway. A school band was playing so loudly that reporters could not hear, and the space was so narrow that TV camera operators could not get a good picture.

At least a week before the event, the spokesperson should have asked the hospital for a room to hold the press conference, notified the media as to its availability and time, and had the press aide traveling with him go to the room in advance—even an hour ahead of time—to check it. Instead, the reporters were frustrated, and the government official missed the opportunity to promote a “good news” story.

During the Press Conference

- ⇒ Have a sign-in sheet for the press and any visitors so you know who attended.
- ⇒ Tell reporters at the beginning of the press conference—whether in person, on the phone or via webcast—how much time the speaker has, and be prepared to cut off questions at that time.
- ⇒ Keep the press conference and statements short. The press will be more receptive to an official who makes a short statement and takes questions as opposed to one who gives a half-hour speech.
- ⇒ Allow time for questions, particularly if you are in an unfamiliar place. Have reporters identify themselves (name and affiliation) before they ask a question. This

helps particularly when the event is broadcast or put on the Web.

- ⇒ Videotape the remarks made by the government official so they can be posted on your website and also edited into shorter segments for posting on YouTube. Make sure you save copies and transcripts of the remarks so you have an official, permanent record.
- ⇒ If an official is asked a question that he or she cannot answer, he should admit it but promise to get back to the reporter with the information later by a specified time (end of the day, for example).

After the Press Conference

- ⇒ Get responses to unanswered questions asked during the press conference.
- ⇒ Put a video of the press conference on your Web page as soon as possible to make it widely available. Cut snippets and post them on YouTube. Also make a written transcript and put this on your Web page.
- ⇒ Blog and tweet about what was said with links to the transcript and video.
- ⇒ Email or send out materials and a tran-

Get responses to unanswered questions asked during the press conference.

- script to any media that could not attend but might have an interest in the story.
- ⇒ Fulfill all promises for additional materials or responses to unanswered questions within deadline times.
- ⇒ Critique each step of the operation, and write up your notes for the next conference.

Telephone Press Conferences

Press conferences can also be conducted by telephone. “About a day in advance, we email a media advisory with the usual who, what, when information and the phone number and invite the media to call in,” the deputy communications director of one U.S. Cabinet official said. Reporters typically preregister and then anyone can ask questions.



TO THE POINT

POOL REPORTING

Pool reporting involves representatives of each type of media “pooling together” to cover an event. Pool reporting is an option when the site for an event or press conference is not large enough to accommodate all the reporters interested in covering the news. For example, press pools are used frequently at the White House, where the space in the president’s Oval Office is limited.

Participation in a press pool rotates—by media, not government selection—to different outlets each time a “pool” is required. This gives every news organization a chance to participate over time.

A typical “pool” consists of a wire service reporter, a print reporter or blogger, a magazine reporter, a broadcast reporter, a camera person, a sound person and a still photographer. Sometimes there might be a single camera filming the event for transmission to reporters in a nearby room.

Pool reporting can also be very useful during disasters, when a site is dangerous but reporters need to get firsthand knowledge of the situation and photographers and videographers need pictures.

“The technology we use allows us to view on a computer screen the names and affiliations of the reporters who are participating. We can see which reporters want to ask questions and then call on them.” Typically the Cabinet secretary will make a brief statement and take questions and follow-ups.

“Phone conference calls are great,” the official added, “because they allow out-of-town reporters a chance to participate easily.” They also can be targeted to specific media coverage, such as bloggers.



TO THE POINT

WORKING WITH JOURNALISTS

To interact effectively with reporters, you must understand the news business, how it works, reporters’ daily routines, what they need to do a story and when their deadlines occur. Know how they prefer to receive information—by phone, email, SMS or tweet. Understand what the daily schedule of a reporter is like: They often are juggling numerous stories, having to update ones they have already done, and working across media platforms—writing, shooting video, doing audio transmissions, blogging and tweeting.

It is crucial to get to know journalists before you have news. When you—or they—are new to a job is a great time to get to know each other. Have coffee or tea and learn about their particular news interests, their deadlines and how they like to be reached. It can be too late to get to know a journalist in the middle of a crisis.

Always remember that cooperation is a two-way street: Not only do reporters need government officials to get information, reporters can be an important source of intelligence on what is going on and what might come up.

Maintain up-to-date lists of media contacts so you can quickly target your news in a crisis.

- ▣ List the names of journalists, bloggers and social media reporters, their affiliations, their beats or special interests, addresses at work and at home, mobile phone numbers, fax numbers, email addresses and Facebook and Twitter addresses.
- ▣ Maintain separate lists of reporters by beat or interest and by geographic region, and make sure the lists are kept up to date.
- ▣ Find out the name, title and contact information of the person in each media outlet who decides what news will be covered and at what time of the day, week or month story decisions are made. Learn how far in advance of an event a media outlet wants to be notified.
- ▣ Know each reporter’s deadline and don’t call during those times.
- ▣ Know how each contact wants to receive news—by email, tweet, SMS, fax or hard copy.
- ▣ Put news in the format that journalists can use. Do not bury your news. Put the who, what, where, when, why and how at the top.
- ▣ Summarize. If you have a report, write an executive summary.



President George W. Bush's press secretary, Scott McClellan, briefs reporters. When speaking on the record, everything you say to a reporter can be attributed to you by name. © AP Images/Pablo Martinez Monsivais



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Interviews in Focus

Part of any media strategy should be interviews. Before agreeing to do an interview, a government official should thoroughly plan what he or she would like to achieve by doing the interview and identify who the audience will be. To focus the message, write the headline you would like to see on the story. Also decide what is the best venue: in person, over the phone or via email.

Assessing the Interview Request

When an interview request comes in, getting answers to certain questions will help you assess the request. These include:

- ⇒ What is the topic or news angle of the interview?
- ⇒ What is the impetus for the story?
- ⇒ Which online or print publication or blog, video or radio media wants to do the interview? Or will it appear on several media platforms, such as in print with a link to a video in the publication's online version?
- ⇒ Who will be the interviewer?
- ⇒ When and where do they want the interview?
- ⇒ How much time is the reporter requesting for the interview?
- ⇒ What is the interviewer's deadline?
- ⇒ When will the interview be published or broadcast?

⇒ What kind of a story is it? A news story? A profile story? A feature? A question-and-answer format? Or is it an interview to inform an op-ed?

⇒ Is anyone else being interviewed for the story?

⇒ What are the characteristics of the media outlet and the reporter?

It is important to determine:

⇒ If the media outlet has an apparent point of view or bias on the subject.

⇒ How much the reporter knows about the topic.

⇒ If the reporter or media outlet has published any coverage of the topic in the past. Research online or find press clippings.

⇒ How friendly or antagonistic the reporter is.

⇒ What audience the news outlet attracts.

Have no more than three points to make in an interview. More than three major points can be confusing and hard for audiences to absorb.

For a radio or TV interview, pertinent questions include:

- ⇒ Will it be a live broadcast or taped to be shown later?
- ⇒ Will the interview be conducted in a studio, by phone, in the government official's office or in some other location?
- ⇒ Will it be by remote, with the interviewer not physically present but asking questions from another site while connected remotely, such as by Skype?
- ⇒ Is the interview being taped for uncut airing, or is it being taped for excerpting?
- ⇒ Will the broadcast include call-ins or emails from viewers, listeners or an online audience?
- ⇒ How long will the interview last?
- ⇒ What is the show's format? A panel? One interviewer and one guest? Two interviewers and one guest? Two guests debating?
- ⇒ If there are other guests, in what order will they speak?
- ⇒ Will it be before an audience? How will the audience be selected?
- ⇒ Can visual props be used?
- ⇒ Will film clips or videotape inserts be used? If so, will the press office have an opportunity to review them and prepare comments or responses?

For an interview for a print or online publication, questions include:

- ⇒ In which section of the publication will the article appear?
- ⇒ Will photographs be taken?

Establishing Ground Rules

Establish ground rules before the interview, not afterward. For example, don't attempt

to put remarks off the record after you have said them. Nor should you say to a reporter "you can't use that" after you make a statement.

If a reporter requests a half-hour interview, you can limit it to a shorter period of time or let it run longer. But you should not abruptly halt a 20-minute interview five minutes after it has begun because you don't like the questions.

In the United States, interview subjects generally don't have the opportunity to review their interviews or quotes before they are published in print or online or broadcast. Any request to review quotes in advance must be established ahead of time.

Preparing For the Interview

It is important that the person being interviewed have no more than three points to make in an interview. This will keep the interview focused. More than three major points can be confusing and hard for audiences to absorb.

Before the interview, the press office should work with other government colleagues to develop:

- ⇒ Three points the interview subject would like to address.
- ⇒ Examples, stories and anecdotes to support each point. These help the reader, listener or viewer better understand the topic. For example, if one point is advocacy of a new economic policy, write down reasons why the current policy is being changed, what the changes mean and how citizens will be affected.
- ⇒ Questions that might be asked during the interview and responses that could be given. The interview subject should be prepared to discuss more topics than the three key issues since reporters, especially good ones, often move from the intended interview topic to other issues.
- ⇒ Review important issues in the news to help you think of potential questions.

In developing questions and responses, answer these questions:

- ⇒ What are the most controversial issues that could be raised and the most delicate topics that could be addressed?
- ⇒ What would be the hardest question to answer and why? Practice answering possible questions.
- ⇒ Bring a video or audio recorder to tape the interview yourself so you can verify statements made and inform key staff members who did not hear what was said.
- ⇒ Arrange a quick update on hot issues just before the interview. The briefer, typically the press secretary, should update the government official with last-minute news. Don't let the official be caught off-guard.
- ⇒ Provide the reporter with information that might be helpful to your issues in advance of the interview. These could be items such as biographies, fact sheets, articles, photographs, blog posts, speeches and reports.
- ⇒ Don't be afraid to suggest questions and topics for the interviewer to ask.

During the Interview: Advice for Government Officials

Make the interview yours. Much more than you may think, you can manage the direction of an interview. Just because you are asked questions does not mean you can't control what you say. As one U.S. president once said: "There are no such things as bad questions, only bad answers."

Do the following:

- ⇒ Be concise; don't bury important points in long answers with too many details. Speak in short, clear, declarative sentences.
- ⇒ Speak in sound bites.
- ⇒ Stay on message and return to the three key points frequently during the interview. Relate questions back to them.
- ⇒ State your conclusions and most quotable lines first to get your main points across, then back them up with facts.
- ⇒ Use positive, descriptive word images that people can understand.

- ⇒ Give proof. Use facts, statistics, examples, anecdotes, quotes and stories. People remember what affects them, what motivates them and what others' experiences are. Word pictures, such as "big as a pick-up truck" rather than just "big," are what people recall.
- ⇒ Don't assume the facts speak for themselves. Explain your answers clearly and succinctly. Not every reporter or citizen will know as much about the subject as you do.
- ⇒ Stay positive.
- ⇒ Correct any misinformation embedded in a question immediately.
- ⇒ Never say anything that you don't want to see online or in print or hear broadcast. If you cannot talk about something, be upfront about it. You can say: "I don't have that information right now but I will get back to you" or "That event is still under investigation, and we will release the information when we are sure about the facts."
- ⇒ Avoid making statements that can be taken out of context or be misconstrued if the reporter or editor chooses to use only that part of your statement and not what came before or after.
- ⇒ Don't use jargon.

Never say anything that you don't want to see online or in print or hear broadcast.

- ⇒ Never say "no comment." You can, and sometimes should, avoid a statement by saying something like, "I'm not prepared to discuss that today" or "It would be inappropriate for me to discuss that at this point."
- ⇒ Be clear. Don't leave it up to the media to interpret what you mean. They might get it wrong.
- ⇒ Always tell the truth. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Get back to the interviewer with the answer later.



TRY THIS

ASSESSING THE INTERVIEW REQUEST

- ⇒ What is the medium and who is the interviewer?
- ⇒ How much time is requested; what is the deadline?
- ⇒ When will the interview be aired or published in print or online, and what kind of story is it?
- ⇒ What is the media type? For TV, will it be live, unedited video or edited with excerpts? And for print, what section of the newspaper or magazine will it be in, and will there be photographs?
- ⇒ May the interviewee provide visuals?

Staying Focused

Although you must respond to questions, you can expand a query and get back to the issue you would like to discuss. This is sometimes referred to as “touch and go”—touch the question and go to an expanded answer that puts the topic in a larger context. Like an accordion, you expand the question, putting the issue more into context. For example, if asked about a recent border incident, you might say disagreements about the border area have been going on for decades, and it is only recently that a serious discussion about redrawing the lines has occurred. That is why your initiative is so important.

Using bridging phrases is another technique to get back to your three main points. This is called the ABCs: Acknowledge the question, Bridge to your topic and Communicate your answer. You use bridging phrases to get back to your three points.

Try these bridge phrases:

- ⇒ That is a very important question...
- ⇒ But the real issue is...
- ⇒ Let me add...
- ⇒ It is important to emphasize...

- ⇒ It is important not to overlook...
- ⇒ What’s more important is...
- ⇒ The most important point to remember is...
- ⇒ Along those lines, another question I’m often asked is...
- ⇒ That deals with one aspect of a larger issue...
- ⇒ Yes, and in addition to that...
- ⇒ No, let me clarify...
- ⇒ It’s a bit too early to talk about that until all the facts are in, but I can tell you...
- ⇒ I’m not sure about that, but what I do know is...
- ⇒ Let me put this into perspective...
- ⇒ That reminds me of...
- ⇒ Let me emphasize that...
- ⇒ I’m glad you asked me that. People may have that misconception, but the truth is...

Always tell the truth. Never deceive or lie, but always try to make the interview yours. As former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger once quipped at a press conference: “Does anyone have any questions for my answers?”

After the Interview

- ⇒ If you promised additional information to the reporter, follow up immediately.
- ⇒ Debrief the media staff so they know what to expect.
- ⇒ Evaluate the interview. Note for your file: What went well in the interview? What could have gone better? Keep the notes for the next interview or press conference.
- ⇒ Get the name of the reporter, producer and sound technician conducting the interview and update your media list.
- ⇒ File the online material, print news clipping, audio tape or video from the interview in a permanent archive.
- ⇒ If you have an interview through an email exchange or other online means, save a copy.
- ⇒ Blog and tweet about the interview if appropriate. Put it on your website.

If the interview is done by email, be aware

of some of the challenges. An advantage is you have the opportunity to think out and put in writing what you want to say. The disadvantage is that it might be difficult for the reporter to ask follow-up questions and really delve into a subject.

Video and Television Interviews

When you are seen on the screen, your message involves at least two key elements: what you say and how you say it—that is, content and presentation. It’s not just your words but also your body language and physical appearance that convey a message. Studies have shown that how you look and come across can be as important as what you say.

If you are delivering a message of optimism but you fold your arms defensively across your chest, frown, and look down with no eye contact, your negative body language will be at odds with your positive words and deflate your upbeat message. Your body language should reinforce, not detract from, your message.

A press office staff should follow the “before,” “during” and “after” guidance when a government official appears on video. Before a video interview for television, for example, you should know if the interview is live or taped and if questions will be called in or sent in via email or social media. You need

Use the ABCs to Acknowledge the question, Bridge to your topic and Communicate your answer.



TRY THIS

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

- ▶▶▶ Have three points to make in the interview and have examples, anecdotes and sound bites to support them.
- ▶▶▶ Write practice questions and answers.
- ▶▶▶ Practice!
- ▶▶▶ Get an update on the news before giving the interview.
- ▶▶▶ Set ground rules before—not during or after—an interview.

to know if the official will be interviewed alone or with others, and if the latter, in what order are the appearances. One press secretary was almost fired after her boss, a top government official, had only 20 minutes rather than an hour on the country’s leading evening interview program. The appearance was during an election, and the chief opponent appeared on the next segment, squashing the boss’s message. The press secretary had rightly asked if her boss’s interview would be first, but had not asked who would follow.

What You Say

Think in advance of a good quote or “sound bite” you can use. A sound bite is a short, pithy statement, often memorable, that captures your message succinctly and will stay with the audience after the interview. Even though there was no TV in his day, American writer Mark Twain could have been talking about sound bites when he referred to “a minimum of sound to a maximum of sense.”

How You Say It

- ⇒ Look directly at the interviewer if the interview is in person. Have steady eye contact. Eyes darting around tell the viewer you are

trying to hide something or are unsure of yourself. A steady, powerful gaze shows trustworthiness. If you have to read or glance at notes, move your eyes down, not your entire head.

- ⇒ Look at the camera if the interview is by remote with the interviewer in another location. The camera becomes the person to whom you are talking.
- ⇒ Lean forward slightly toward the camera when sitting, as this can create intimacy with viewers. Never slouch.
- ⇒ Put one foot a little in front of the other while standing or sitting to avoid rocking.
- ⇒ Use natural hand gestures so you don't appear stiff or uncomfortable.
- ⇒ Don't bob your head, drum your fingers, swivel in your chair or shift back and forth. This is distracting and can also make you move in and out of the picture frame.
- ⇒ Answer questions in full sentences. Don't give "yes" and "no" answers. For example, if the interviewer says, "I understand the highway will be completed next year," don't simply reply, "Yes." It sounds better to say, "Yes, the super highway linking X city and Y city is on schedule to be completed early next year."
- ⇒ Do not use trade or technical jargon or acronyms that are not familiar to the average citizen.
- ⇒ Round off numbers so they are more easily absorbed. For example, instead of saying "four-hundred-and-forty-four thousand," say "almost half a million."
- ⇒ Communicate your message in the first 30 seconds and from there expand on your basic points.
- ⇒ Be enthusiastic and energetic: Television can flatten and make a person appear bland. Always be calm and in control even when asked a tough question. Be direct but stay positive and reassuring as much as possible. The worst: being defensive, angry or lecturing. Never lose control.
- ⇒ Be concise. A 15- to 20-minute interview will be cut to less than one minute.
- ⇒ Don't use "filler"—that is, don't mumble



TRY THIS

DURING THE INTERVIEW

- ⇒ Stay on message with your three points.
- ⇒ Be concise and clear.
- ⇒ Cite anecdotes, facts and examples.
- ⇒ Never say "no comment."
- ⇒ Tell the truth; don't be afraid to say you don't know an answer if you don't.

or say "hmmm" or "ahhh" or "uhhh" between words or phrases. This sometimes occurs when people are thinking of what to say next. Instead, pause, think about your answer and then say it.

- ⇒ Be humorous. Humor is one of the best forms of communication.
- ⇒ Always assume the microphone is on. Many officials have said things they wish they hadn't because they thought the sound phone was off.

What to Wear

Equally important is how you look.

- ⇒ Wear colors in contrast with your background. The rule has been to wear solid colors, light but not white or total black. Midrange colors, especially blues, are best. Do not wear busy plaids, stripes, loud prints or flashy, shiny fabrics that can shimmer and distract.
- ⇒ Dress appropriately for your occupation, location and message. If your message is sober and serious, dress in a suit; if fun and informal, wear a more casual outfit. You would not wear business attire at the beach, for example.
- ⇒ For women, do not over-accessorize, such as by wearing jangly, large or shiny jewelry that could distract from your message.
- ⇒ For men, do not wear a shirt darker than your tie. If bald, think of lightly powdering or wiping your head with a tissue to cut

shininess from TV lights. If you have a heavy beard, shave before going on camera.

- ⇒ Do not wear sunglasses or glasses that darken under lights. Remove your eyeglasses if you can get along without them. The glass might reflect camera lights. Remove them at least 15 minutes before the interview to adjust your eyes and get the pressure marks off your nose.
- ⇒ Find out if a clip-on microphone will be

used and wear clothes with a lapel to easily clip it to.

- ⇒ Know if you will get makeup at the studio. If not, arrive with a little more than normal. Remember you want to be interviewed again. Don't be difficult or high maintenance. Interviewers always come back to "subjects" who are relaxed, have something interesting to say, give good quotes, and are easy to work with.



TO THE POINT

SPEAKING ON AND OFF THE RECORD

Whenever possible, speak on the record to reporters. It is the preferred way to talk with the media. Since you want the information about your program, your idea, or your message to reach the public, why not have your name attached to it?

"The safest course of action is to assume that all you say to a reporter will end up in the newspaper, especially in the beginning before you know the reporters you are working with and are confident in who will accept the terms of the agreement," said former Clinton White House press secretary Dee Dee Myers.

As you develop a relationship with a reporter, you learn to whom you can speak more freely. "Then you can use 'background' as a way to explain more complex subjects without having to risk being taken out of context," she said. "But in emerging democracies, where rules aren't clear, you can get burned talking off the record."

The ground rules of how you are speaking must be established before you speak. Not afterward. Here is what the terms mean:

- ⇒ **On the record.** When you speak on the record, everything you say to a reporter may be used and attributed to you by name. "Embargoed" information is on the record but cannot be reported until an hour and date specified by the person releasing the information.
- ⇒ **On background.** When you tell a journalist you are speaking on background, he or she can use what you say but cannot attribute it to you by name or title. The reporter attributes your statements to a previously agreed upon identification, such as "a well-informed source," "an expert" or "a high-level government official." Investigative and print reporters, in particular, use "on background" more than broadcast journalists and like to use as much information as possible to explain why the individual could not be identified.
- ⇒ **On deep background.** When you establish before an interview that you are speaking only on deep background, a reporter may use the information but without giving any attribution. Anything said in the interview is usable but not in direct quotation and not for attribution.
- ⇒ **Off the record.** When you speak off the record, you give information to a reporter that is for his or her knowledge only and cannot be used, printed or made public in any way. A reporter ideally should not take the information to another source in the hopes of getting official confirmation. Sometimes, spokespersons use an off-the-record briefing to provide context for an issue when a reporter appears to be off the mark on a story and privacy laws prevent making information public on the record.

Any information communicated via email or other digital media is usually on the record. Unless clearly agreed that the information will not be passed on, it is difficult to put an email on background, let alone off the record. Government officials should assume that their emails are public.



Hands fly as President Obama's former press secretary, Robert Gibbs, briefs the press. In a crisis, it is best to be forthcoming and honest with reporters. © Doug Mills/The New York Times/Redux



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Crisis Communications

A crisis is an event that occurs suddenly, often unexpectedly, and demands a quick response. A crisis interferes with normal routines and creates uncertainty and stress. A crisis can be a natural event, such as an earthquake or a hurricane, or it can be man-made, such as an explosion, a scandal or a conflict. Ultimately, it can threaten the reputation of a top official and an organization. A well-managed crisis, however, can not only preserve reputations and credibility, but it can also enhance them.

Communication is key to the successful management of a crisis, and the best way to be effective is to be prepared before a crisis occurs. Once an emergency happens, there is little time to think, much less plan. Without an overall crisis management and communications plan to which all senior managers in an organization have contributed, the emergency will be overwhelming and the public will quickly lose confidence. Who is on the crisis management team depends on the agency, topic and kind of crisis, but typically members might include officials involved with health, communications, fire and rescue, law enforcement, emergency management and transportation. The communications manager would handle the crisis communications and be a key player in the

overall crisis management team. The crisis communications plan would launch once the emergency occurred.

“Good crisis communications is based on a system already in place,” said former White House press secretary Marlin Fitzwater. “When there is a crisis, you just tighten it up and make it better. If you routinely had a daily press briefing, you would tighten it up and make it three times a day. A crisis is no time to design a new system.”

In a crisis, the best course of action is to be forthcoming and honest and to do what it takes to facilitate news coverage. The media are going to write and broadcast stories with or without your help. It’s in your best interest to participate in a story—even a negative one—in order to have your position correctly

“If you do not engage and respond, the media will simply get information in another way, and it might be information that is not correct.”

represented. The alternative is for the media to write that a government official “would not respond to our inquiries,” which only fuels suspicions and rumors.

“If you do not engage and respond, the media will simply get information in another way, and it might be information that is not correct,” said one government communicator.

“In a crisis, bring all the key players into a room and get the facts straight. Never tell more than you know, don’t freelance what you think, and constantly update reporters,” said a former reporter and government communicator. “Reporters have to get information, and if you don’t give them anything, they will report rumors.”

Today, digital and social media make it easier to communicate during a crisis. Social media can get messages out quickly to a wide audience and can get feedback from them as well. Twitter, in particular, has become particularly effective for emergency communications.

That is what happened during a tornado in Memphis, Tennessee. “We had begun by blogging and using Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, but then a tornado hit,” said the supervisor of communications and public relations for Memphis Light, Gas and Water (MLGW), a public utility.

“We used Twitter to update customers about outages, and the response was tremendous. Our growth went from 220 followers to over 1,500 over five days. It was a landmark event for us,” he said.

MLGW tweeted on outage updates, safety, numbers to call, restoration progress, as well as doing rumor control. “And one of the biggest advantages was the information we pulled from customers,” he said.

In another southern city, hit by historic floods, social media “was an excellent tool to use for rumor control,” the communications manager later blogged. She added that Facebook and Twitter usage in the city tripled during the emergency. “These citizens want the latest, happening-now information.” Not only did the city send citizens information, but citizens provided the city “with information from our neighborhoods on downed trees, flooded streets and more.”

Sometimes crisis management can mean tracking issues that could become crises and dealing with them before they mature to full-blown emergencies. If a well-used highway is near a landslide area, conditions should be monitored and improved by the crisis management team before a landslide occurs. The crisis communicator, as part of this, would alert the public to the potential dangers. The press official might use more traditional media to highlight dangers, and if a landslide struck, would use social media such as Twitter and Facebook to alert to the emergency. They and other social media are effective early warning systems for breaking news. Coordination is also important.

“The key to dealing with crises is focusing on what it is you’re trying to achieve,” Doug Wilson, President Obama’s assistant secretary of defense for public affairs at the Pentagon, told *The Washington Post*. “You have to think about who you need to involve as you develop positions and responses. That means understanding that there are many components and players and making sure you reach out to all of them. I have found that inclusion, tempered by focus and awareness of the need to move expeditiously, usually results in the kind of decision-making that enjoys broad support.”

Digital and social media make it easier to communicate during a crisis.

And as in other elements of communication, there is the before, the during, and the after in effective crisis communications.

Before a Crisis: Develop a Communications Plan

- ⇒ Maintain trustworthy, credible relationships with the media all of the time. If you do, the media will be less suspicious and more cooperative in the midst of a crisis.
- ⇒ In collaboration with the overall crisis team, collect information on potentially troublesome issues and trends. Evaluate them and develop communications strategies to prevent or redirect their course.
- ⇒ Determine which agencies might take the lead and which would be members of a crisis management team for possible crisis scenarios. For example, if you are in a hurricane zone, determine which agency would be the lead—perhaps an emergency management agency—and which others would be part of the crisis team, such as agriculture, housing, health, education, transportation and seniors, whose missions would be impacted by the crisis.
- ⇒ Establish procedures for collaboration among agencies to minimize redundancy and to ensure that information is consistent and accurate.
- ⇒ Identify members of a possible crisis management team. Have in place the roles they would play as well as a list of their office, home and mobile phone numbers, their email addresses, Facebook and Twitter addresses and home addresses. When a crisis hits, one means of communication may be shut down, and you may have to turn to another.
- ⇒ Have a designated crisis communications manager, who would be part of this team.
- ⇒ Save copies of the crisis team’s biographies. In a crisis, the press may want to know the backgrounds of those dealing with it.
- ⇒ Give media training to anyone who will speak to the press.

- ⇒ Determine the message, target and media outlets that could be used in various crisis scenarios.
- ⇒ Know the media you would use to put out messages about the crisis. Plan to put videos and transcripts of all press conferences on your website and on your social media sites as well as any other materials, such as statements, press releases, fact sheets and photos that you might release.

“Reporters have to get information, and if you don’t give them anything, they will report rumors.”

- ⇒ Develop a social media strategy as part of any crisis communications plan. Twitter may be one of the first places citizens turn for updates in a crisis. In traditional media, radio is particularly important in emergencies.
- ⇒ Have a list of the office, home and mobile phone numbers and email addresses of your staff and reporters.
- ⇒ Come up with a procedure to coordinate communication across agencies. Assign which agency takes the lead on what issue. This is particularly easy when discussing natural disasters, such as hurricanes or earthquakes, which may reoccur.
- ⇒ Develop a first-hour response checklist.
- ⇒ Draw up an organization fact sheet as the information might be needed.
- ⇒ Have a plan for setting up a media crisis center. This should cover such items as desks, chairs, and technical needs. Decide how you will keep the office secure, particularly for your own staff.
- ⇒ Develop scenarios to deal with crisis at special events. For example, at a recent international conference organized by a number of organizations, the crisis communications plan designated spokespersons for different controversies that related to each of their audiences. The group also

developed talking points for the spokespersons on more general issues that might arise. Fortunately none did, but still they were prepared.

During a Crisis

When a crisis hits, immediately get the word to the press and release information through social media and your website. Otherwise, the media—and the public—will get information through other sources, which may not be as accurate. As the saying goes: If you are not quick, you are not relevant.

“The media will act in a predictable way,” a former reporter told a convention of government communicators. The media “will seek to get close to the action, will talk to anyone, will research past incidents, will seek out third-party experts, will seek to establish cause or blame, will identify with victims, will often get the story wrong, and will have a short attention span.”

You need to help them do their job.

As part of your planning checklist, she suggested having an initial statement to use immediately—something like, “My name is so-and-so and I am TITLE with ORGANIZATION. I can confirm there has been an incident. We want to assist with your story but we have to gather facts before saying anything. We want to get the story right, and at the moment we don’t have enough information to answer questions. We will be back in touch in an hour to give you an update, and all briefings will come from the media center.”

- ⇒ Set up a 24-hour crisis and media center at a central place from which news is released, rumors dealt with, facts gathered and briefings held.
- ⇒ Immediately “go public” through all your media tools. Post what you know online in video and transcript formats, and in audio mode. Tweet key information and also use SMS messages.
- ⇒ Develop one Web page and one social media site into which each government

agency that is involved in the crisis management can post their information. This will help citizens quickly get information and prevent their having to search numerous sites.

- ⇒ Have a trained spokesperson at the scene—or at the media center—to conduct press briefings. Update him or her on when the next briefing will occur.
- ⇒ Say what you know and only what you know. Don’t say anything based on rumor. Don’t speculate. If you don’t know something, admit it. Saying “the matter is under investigation” may be the best response.
- ⇒ Gather information as quickly as possible. Determine the basic who, what, when, where and how. You might not get the “why” until much later.

When a crisis hits, immediately get the word to the press and release information through social media and your website.

- ⇒ Get the government or agency leader and other top management to the crisis site or the media center as soon as possible. Citizens want to see the leader, not just the crisis manager or public affairs staff, when a crisis hits. Having top management in front of the press during a crisis lends credibility and shows that the organization is treating the situation seriously.
- ⇒ Inform your internal audiences—the staff and other government offices—at the same time you inform the press. Staff need information too. Because they work at an organization involved in the crisis, they will be seen by the media and public as sources of information. They need to have it right and not be the origin of rumors and false information. You can communicate with your internal audiences by email, SMS, tweets or other means. If

possible, convene a meeting at which members of the crisis team are available to answer staff questions.

- ⇒ Speak on the record.
- ⇒ Treat all media equally. Shut no reporter out.
- ⇒ Maintain a calm, gracious and helpful presence. Avoid appearing flustered or overwhelmed.
- ⇒ Pre-empt negative publicity and communicate the actions being taken to solve the crisis. Verify news before releasing it.
- ⇒ Arrange for media access to the scene of the crisis, if at all possible. Photographers and videographers need pictures; reporters need to write up what they see. If there are space constraints, use press pools to write up a report and take pictures to share with their colleagues. No media representatives, including those in the pool, may use these until all media wanting them have them in hand.
- ⇒ Take care of the practical and technical needs of the press, such as desks, chairs and so forth.
- ⇒ Keep a log of reporters who have called, emailed, texted or communicated by social media. List what they asked, their deadlines, if indicated, what you promised, and to whom it was delegated.
- ⇒ Quickly return phone calls, emails, SMS messages and social media queries. If you don't, the media will look elsewhere for information. They will write a story with or without your help. When you are not responsive, you lose control of a story.
- ⇒ Constantly update news on your website and social media properties.
- ⇒ Simple sympathetic gestures can help rebuild the public's confidence. Offer reassurance. Tell what actions are being taken to solve the problem, to help those affected, and to return things to normal. But first make sure you are doing what you say you are doing and only state the facts as known.
- ⇒ Make sure the spokesperson is involved with senior management in every decision and policy made. Each decision has a

public ramification, whether management recognizes it or not.

- ⇒ Avoid fixing blame. That can be done after an investigation.
- ⇒ Express empathy for victims.
- ⇒ Appeal to third-party endorsements for your efforts. Get credible people who have been through similar experiences and command the public's attention and respect to speak on your behalf.
- ⇒ Update information frequently and regularly. Announce when your next update will be.
- ⇒ Monitor media reports and correct errors immediately.
- ⇒ Establish an assessment group to study the problem and to prevent future occurrences. This is not for show; they should have real power.
- ⇒ Remember: openness and responsiveness during a crisis enhance your respect and credibility with the media and most importantly the public. It can help you in the long run.

After a Crisis

- ⇒ Evaluate how you did in the crisis. Determine what worked, what didn't work and what needs to be improved.
- ⇒ Assess the effectiveness of the crisis plan.
- ⇒ Correct problems so they don't happen again.



TRY THIS

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

- ▮ Have a crisis plan.
- ▮ Go public immediately using all your media tools, including social media, but only state what you know.
- ▮ Get top management to the crisis site.
- ▮ Inform your internal audiences.
- ▮ Update frequently and regularly.



TO THE POINT

DEALING WITH FALSE AND NEGATIVE NEWS

Sometimes the media report untrue news on purpose, but most of the time inaccurate reports are made by mistake. If you are misquoted in a story or if misinformation is given, act promptly. Correct the misinformation by digital media or reach out to the reporter or writer. Don't make threats. Have facts, and expect everything you say in correcting the mistake to be on the record. If you don't get anywhere with the reporter, only then go to his or her editor.

You can ask for a retraction or correction of an error, and many officials do this. But others feel it only keeps the misinformation in the news by dredging it up again. With media online, incorrect news can be accessed in perpetuity. For this reason, requesting a correction may be the route to take.

"What I do depends on the severity of an error," said a communications director of a federal agency. He did nothing when a headline was utterly incorrect but the story itself was essentially correct. "We let that go," he said.

The same strategy holds true if the error is on a social media platform, such as a blog. "Usually rebuttals or corrections are only put out if the article and/or the blogger is prominent enough to be noticed and might drive other coverage," said an official at the Department of Defense. "These take the form of a blast email sent from the press secretary or other senior spokesman to the press corps or an old-fashioned phone call. However, this is where Twitter and other social media can be most effective."

Social media allow you to get out the correct information instantly and to update it as needed after that. With social media, you can make a correction or clarification without directly taking on a media outlet or reporter and hence possibly damaging relations.

That is what happened at one U.S. government agency, when the communications staff felt a story in an influential newspaper completely misinterpreted what the head of the government agency had said. "My boss did not want to confront the reporter," the public affairs director stated. Instead, the agency head wrote a blog on the topic that set the record straight without mentioning the newspaper, article or reporter. The newspaper followed up with a subsequent story correctly articulating the government official's opinion as expressed in the blog. "When you feel it is necessary to set the record straight, digital and social media offer a good mode to put something in your own words," the public affairs director added.

An error on social media need not be handled differently than one in a newspaper or broadcast. "We handle bloggers' errors the same way as we would those of traditional media: ignore the small stuff and challenge the important stuff, aggressively and quickly correct misinformation when the issue is important," said a government communicator.

Speed is crucial, and deadlines are even faster. Responses and information need to be provided quickly. "You cannot wait until the end of the day," said one Defense Department official, pointing to the former slower pace in correcting an error with traditional media. Unless you update or correct information quickly, "the damage may have already been done because it's been circulating online for so long beforehand," he added. That's why moving quickly on social and mobile media to clarify or correct misinformation is so important and so easy.

Sometimes one way to address false information is to change the topic. When a blogger sent an email to opinion makers in a former Soviet Union country stating that a key opposition leader had been assassinated, the untrue rumor spread quickly through the blogosphere. The

opponent and her press secretary thought they had three options: confront the falsehood by saying, “the leading opponent is alive,” which could give credibility to a falsehood; do nothing, which could make the falsehood spread faster; or invite a television crew to videotape the opponent without addressing the absurd rumor so the public could see she was alive. In this case, shifting the focus to another topic was the best step.

When you know a false or negatively skewed story is going to break, you may need to go public with your version of the story before your critics do. Once a public view hardens on an issue, it can be difficult to change.

“Social media can also enable you to quickly counter enemy falsehoods,” Doug Wilson, President Obama’s assistant secretary of defense for public affairs told *The Washington Post*. “The instantaneous and comprehensive nature of social media are its strengths, and you play to those strengths in situations where you know that the recipients are similarly equipped.”

The adages to remember in dealing with false and negative news are:

- ⇒ Tell it all. Tell it first. Tell it yourself.
- ⇒ Recall the old newspaper saying: “Never pick fights with anyone who buys ink by the barrel.” That is, don’t pick fights with the media. Correct the inaccurate news without casting blame.



President Obama's first press secretary, Robert Gibbs, talks to reporters on board Air Force One. Getting to know journalists before you have news is crucial. © AP Images/Lawrence Jackson



President Obama meets with President John Evans Atta Mills of Ghana in the Oval Office. Thorough planning is required for any event in which a government official participates. © AP Images/Susan Walsh



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Event Planning

A government press office is called upon to deal with many kinds of public events. There are “media events” to which the press is invited, called “open press” in the United States. There are events that are not open to the press, called “closed press” events. In both cases, “press” refers to traditional media, such as print and broadcast journalists, and digital or social media reporters.

A press spokesperson should be able to manage any event—open press or not—whether the official is hosting it or attending as a guest of someone else. Think of this as theater or ballet. Everything should be planned, scripted and choreographed with elements relating to the overall theme of the play or the ballet. Every detail and each person’s role should be well thought out. There should be a director from your staff on site to make sure that the event unfolds as planned.

Event Checklist

Have regular meetings to discuss invitations if you get a number of them. If a government official receives a high volume of invitations, it makes sense to form a committee made up of representatives of key operations within the organization—including the press office—to review invitations on a regular basis and make recom-

mendations about whether to accept or reject each one.

An important part of outside event planning is assessing the invitation. Consider this: A government official traveled several hours to give a speech to an audience he thought would be supporters. But once there, he found he was on stage with opponents, whom he was expected to debate in front of an unfriendly audience. No staff had checked the arrangements in advance, so no one knew that the actual event deviated from the invitation, which had been given orally.

To prevent surprises, many politicians request that all invitations be put in writing. That way they know exactly what is being requested and can negotiate their participation according to what is written. Many then respond in writing stating what their participation will be.

When an invitation comes in orally and not in written form, the press spokesper-

son or scheduler might say: “Our policy here is to have invitations in writing. Please mail, fax or email a request with the following information:”

- ⇒ The title of the event.
- ⇒ Its purpose.
- ⇒ The date and time(s). In this regard, it is good to find out if there is any flexibility. For instance, if a conference is being held over several days and an official is invited for one specific day on which he or she is engaged elsewhere, can another date be substituted?
- ⇒ The location.
- ⇒ The number of people expected to attend.
- ⇒ Whether there will be other participants, and who they will be.
- ⇒ Whether there’s a tradition of having a particular official speak at similar events.
- ⇒ What the official’s role will be—to give the main address, to be the sole speaker,

to be one of several speakers on a panel, to speak on a certain topic, and so forth.

- ⇒ Whether the event is open or closed to the press.
- ⇒ If this is an annual or repeat event, and how the media have covered it in the past.
- ⇒ Whether there will be a bloggers’ corner, official hashtag, webinar, and how social media will be used. Also, you will want to decide how you can use the material later, such as on blogs, social media and your Web page. How will the host organization publicize the event after the fact?

Once you have answers to the questions above, you can review the written invitation and make an informed decision about participating. You can suggest changes, negotiating from what has been written. You should respond in writing as to what you want to accept and what will be your participation.



Vice President Joe Biden speaks to the press in Charleston, South Carolina. When addressing the media, speak in plain language and avoid using jargon. © Mahmood Fazal/Bloomberg via Getty Images

Planning for an Event in the Organization

Thorough planning is necessary for every event in which top government officials participate. This is especially true for events such as the visit of a head of state or a meeting of several foreign ministers.

As a first step, appoint a manager to oversee the entire event. He or she might manage all elements or may supervise several other people who are handling different tasks.

Decide if there is a theme for the event:

- ⇒ What is its purpose?
- ⇒ What goals do you want to achieve?
- ⇒ What impact do you want to have?
- ⇒ What is the message you would like the event to relay?

Establish deadlines for the various components of the event:

- ⇒ By what date must a speech be completed?
- ⇒ By what deadline are materials or notices required?
- ⇒ By what dates are approvals needed?
- ⇒ By what date should invitations be sent?
- ⇒ By when should the media be alerted?

Have regular meetings with those involved in the event to make sure that assignments are being carried out. Make a site visit at least one day in advance to check on arrangements. The bigger the event, the further in advance the site visit should occur—for a state visit, probably several weeks in advance; for a half-hour meeting between ministers, at least an hour in advance. Always have someone from your staff at the site several hours before the event so that he or she can manage any last-minute changes.

Prepare a briefing book for the event that includes the schedule, list of participants, whether the event is open or closed to the media, talking points or speech, biographies of important people attending the event, a summary of political and other key issues, and newspaper articles related to the issues.

Write thank-you notes after the event to those involved, such as the key attendees and staff.

Hold a follow-up meeting with your staff and write a short report on what went well and what did not, so as to improve future events.

About five to 10 hours of planning are required for each hour of an event.

Planning for an Event Outside the Organization

Follow similar steps if the official is being hosted by someone else. Review everything related to the official's participation, including the invitation and press materials in which the official is mentioned.

Have a staff member at the site in advance of the event. That way he or she can advocate on your behalf, learn if there are changes to the program and alert your official. Without this, you will have no control over the official's participation.

Once you've decided on the "message" for an event, you should determine the best location to get across the message to the public. For example, if an event concerns an announcement about education, the best spot could be an educational setting such as a school. Once you've selected a school, consider the following:

- ⇒ What is the best classroom for the event?



TRY THIS

BEFORE ACCEPTING AN INVITATION

- ⇒ Get a request in writing.
- ⇒ Find out when and where the event is and if there is flexibility to change dates and times.
- ⇒ Clarify the purpose of the event and the role requested of the official.
- ⇒ Determine whether the press can attend and cover the proceedings.
- ⇒ Ask for the number of guests and the names of the other important participants.

- ⇒ Should older or younger children be involved? Who needs to give permission if they appear in a picture? Written permission from school officials and parents is likely to be required.
- ⇒ What visual picture do you want to present; what backdrop best achieves that and fits the message?
- ⇒ Who else should be there to help develop the message? Are there teachers, school administrators, perhaps the minister of

education, who should be included either as speakers or as guests? Decide when they should be invited, who should invite them, and what role they should play.

You can also initiate events. For example, you could create an event around a national labor day by either structuring your own event or requesting to speak before a labor group. No matter how the event comes about, the same event-planning rules apply.



Briefing books give officials advance information about an event, such as U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit with her Moroccan counterpart Taieb Fassi Fihri. © AP Images/Abdeljalil Bounhar



TO THE POINT

THE BRIEFING BOOK

In the United States, when a high-level government official participates in events, the staff prepares a briefing book in advance to give the official information about the event and the people who will be attending. A briefing book, which is usually in a binder, is intended to maximize everyone's participation...and to avoid surprises.

Typically, the information required for a briefing book would be in a template that could be filled out for each new event. Usually a briefing book addresses most of the following:

- ▶▶▶ The purpose of the event.
- ▶▶▶ The attire, or dress—casual, business or formal.
- ▶▶▶ The weather forecast for the day of the event.
- ▶▶▶ The size of the audience.
- ▶▶▶ Whether the press will be there and whether cameras are expected.
- ▶▶▶ The location for the event.
- ▶▶▶ The name of the staff coordinator for the event, along with telephone, cell phone and beeper numbers.
- ▶▶▶ The major political issues of concern in the area where the event is being held. The briefing book might include copies of important articles on major local issues.
- ▶▶▶ The names of the participants, their titles and affiliations, and a summary of what they will be doing or saying at the event, if known. Biographies, along with correct pronunciations of names if they are unusual, are also given.
- ▶▶▶ A minute-by-minute agenda or schedule for the event.
- ▶▶▶ What questions are likely from the press or audience, along with possible answers.
- ▶▶▶ Whether there will be social media, such as an official Twitter hashtag used for members of the audience to tweet from the event.
- ▶▶▶ A list of issues to be addressed and those to be avoided.
- ▶▶▶ The names of any people the official should recognize from the podium.
- ▶▶▶ A diagram of the staging area, including where the official sits and stands, and next to whom.



The National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC) has a code of ethics to guide government communication officials, such as former White House press secretary Scott McClellan. © AP Images/Gerald Herbert



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Ethics: Codes of Conduct

The government press officer exists in two realms. You represent the government's position to the public, but you also are responsible for representing the interests of the press to government officials. In a sense, you must serve two masters. This dual role can sometimes pose difficult ethical challenges.

As a press spokesperson, what do you do if your boss tells you to withhold from the press information that is not classified? What do you do if your boss lies to the media, and you know it?

Government press officials have to deal with these questions in every country, including the United States. To help them do this, U.S. communicators at all levels of government have come together, such as through the National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC), to develop a proposed code of behavior.

Government spokesmen must make decisions that serve the public interest and their employers, as well as their personal principles and professional standards. When these values are in conflict, professional codes of conduct can help one determine a course of action. They are the

conscience of a profession. Equally important, a code of ethics can give an employer a clear understanding of the standards of behavior that his or her employees will follow.

Credibility and integrity are essential to a communications official. Although it is important to show loyalty to an employer, anything less than total honesty with the media—and the public—will destroy a spokesperson's credibility, and ultimately obliterate that person's value to an employer as well.

The trust of the media in a spokesperson is hard earned and achieved over time through highly professional and ethical behavior. Thus, the first goal of an ethical communicator is to communicate truthfully the reality of an event, issue, policy or plan.

Common Government Media Principles

While it might seem that the government and the media should be adversarial in their codes of behavior, in a democracy their codes have many principles in common. In the United States, for example, government communicators and journalists' codes of behavior mandate that a professional be truthful, accurate and accountable to the public; not have conflicting interests; work in the public interest; be fair; and be a steward of the public's trust. Ultimately, all that reporters and government spokesmen have is their credibility. Once that is gone, they cannot do their jobs effectively.

“Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.”

On the subject of seeking truth and reporting it, the Code of Ethics for the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) states, “Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information.” Under being accountable, it says, “Journalists are accountable to their readers, listeners, viewers and each other.” It states they should “admit mistakes and correct them promptly.”

Similarly, in its code of ethics, the NAGC says that government communicators will “intentionally communicate no false or misleading information and will act promptly to correct false or misleading information or rumors.”

Both codes of ethics state that their professionals will serve the public, not themselves. The SPJ states that its members “believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of

events and issues. The NAGC Code of Ethics says, “We believe that truth is inviolable and sacred; that providing public information is an essential civil service; and that the public at large and each citizen therein has a right to equal, full, understandable, and timely facts about their government.”

Establishing a Code of Ethics

The ideals expressed in these codes provide a guide, but how can ethical issues be tackled in places where they might not have been thoroughly thought out? Government press officials should consider doing the following:

- ⇒ Write up codes of ethics for government spokesmen and circulate them widely both to those in the profession, to their employers, to the media and citizens.
- ⇒ Set up meetings of government spokesmen. Form professional associations and clubs. Peer pressure to perform to certain levels of behavior serves as a counterweight to unethical actions. And talking about frustrations, common interests, and conflicts may help reduce them.
- ⇒ Enhance educational programs for those who want to go into press relations by adding courses on ethics.
- ⇒ For those already in the profession, encourage training both in the country and out of the country. Seeing how others perform offers the opportunity to pick up best practices.
- ⇒ Establish online and print publications and social media sites to exchange information on dealing with similar problems.

NAGC Ethical Code

The following provides the key sections from the ethical code of the National Association of Government Communicators. “Members will:

- ⇒ Conduct themselves professionally, with truth, accuracy, fairness, responsibility, accountability to the public, and adherence to generally accepted standards of good taste.

- ⇒ Conduct their professional lives in accord with the public interest, in recognition that each of us is a steward of the public's trust.
- ⇒ Convey the truth to their own agencies' management, engaging in no practice which could corrupt the integrity of channels of communication or the processes of government.
- ⇒ Intentionally communicate no false or misleading information and will act promptly to correct false or misleading information or rumors.
- ⇒ Identify publicly the names and titles of individuals involved in making policy decisions, the details of decision-making processes, and how interested citizens can participate.
- ⇒ Represent no conflicting or competing interests and will fully comply with all statutes, executive orders, and regulations pertaining to personal disclosure of such interests.
- ⇒ Avoid the possibility of any improper use of information by an 'insider' or third party and never use inside information for personal gain.
- ⇒ Guarantee or promise the achievement of no specified result beyond the member's direct control.
- ⇒ Accept no fees, commissions, gifts, promises of future consideration, or any other material or intangible valuable that is, or could be perceived to be, connected with public service employment or activities.
- ⇒ Safeguard the confidence of both present and former employees, and of information acquired in meetings and documents, as required by law, regulation and prudent good sense.
- ⇒ Not wrongly injure the professional reputation or practice of another person, private organization, or government agency.
- ⇒ Participate in no activity designed to manipulate the price of a company's securities."

The code also states that if a member has evidence or suspicion of an unethical, illegal or unfair practice, he or she should inform a NAGC official. If found in violation, the person engaged in the unethical practice could be asked to leave the association.



2011 National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC) "Communicator of the Year" U.S. Coast Guard Adm. Thad Allen was recognized for his work during the BP oil spill. © AP Images/Dave Martin



TO THE POINT

THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF DEALING WITH THE MEDIA

DO'S:

- Tell the truth—ALWAYS. Your credibility and reputation depend on it.
- Admit if you don't know the answer to a question. Offer to get the answer, and get it quickly.
- Correct mistakes immediately. State that you didn't give an adequate answer, and you would like to clear up the confusion.
- Avoid using jargon. Speak in plain language.
- Assume that everything you say and write using digital media is on the record.
- Be as open and forthcoming with the media as possible.
- Contact reporters and bloggers if an inaccurate story appears. Substantiate your challenge of any facts with evidence.
- Use all forms of media to get out your messages—not only traditional print and broadcasting, but also Web pages and social media.
- Post responses, negative and positive, to your blogs and your other social media sites. Posting comments is transparent and engages citizens. Establish and publicize your procedures for handling comments that are hateful or lewd.
- Maintain an up-to-date list of accomplishments. Things happen so quickly that you may forget what you, the official, and your ministry or government have achieved. People remember bad news but not good news.
- Return all phone calls and emails promptly, in time for reporters to meet deadlines.
- Provide the information reporters want, even if it means an extra effort, such as staying at work late or hand-delivering material.
- Cultivate a sense of humor. As one official said: "Frustration is almost built into the fabric of the job. Unless you have a sense of humor, it is a grim business indeed."

DON'TS:

- Never lie—EVER.
- Never say "No comment."
- Do not improvise, speculate or guess. Good reporters check facts. If you are wrong, your credibility will be destroyed.
- Do not try to put a comment "off the record" after you have said it.
- Never send out an email and expect it to be private.
- Never fail to respond to a telephone message or email.
- Do not try to make news until you have in hand the information to go with it. Don't make an announcement and then later prepare a press release and fact sheet. Do that beforehand.
- Never harass or threaten reporters.



TO THE POINT

FORMING GROUPS WITH COMMON INTERESTS

Forming groups of government communicators and groups of government Web and social media managers can greatly enhance one's job. Not only does forming professional associations allow for the sharing of common experiences and best practices, but it can also build strong bonds and enhance professionalism.

Two groups that do this in the United States are the National Association of Government Communicators (NAGC) and the Federal Web Managers Council (Web Council). Both have strong ethical guidelines, do training, provide networking opportunities and have websites with much information. More importantly, both try to improve services to the public. One of the goals of the Web Council, for example, is to “collaborate within and across government to modernize policies and improve the government’s ability to deliver online information and services.”

The NAGC, an organization representing government communicators of all titles at all levels of government, proclaims that its members are dedicated to “the goals of better communication, understanding and cooperation among all people.”

“We believe that truth is inviolable and sacred; that providing public information is an essential civil service; and that the public-at-large and each citizen therein has a right to equal, full, understandable and timely facts about their government.” It is dedicated to “providing opportunities for professional advancement, enhancing effective communications with constituents and advancing the profession.” Additionally, the NAGC establishes and promotes high standards of “individual professionalism and public service,” convenes meetings, offers training and sponsors awards.

The Web Council describes itself as “an interagency group of senior federal government Web Managers who collaborate to improve the online delivery of U.S. government information and services.” The group, which is sponsored by the federal government’s central administrative agency, has members who work in policy, communications, public affairs and chief information offices. The Web Council provides a venue for its members to “collaborate and share common challenges, ideas and best practices. Our goal is to create the most citizen-focused and visitor-friendly government websites in the world.” The Web Council also manages www.HowTo.gov, containing many tips on best practices, operates electronic mailing lists and a networking website, offers training and holds conferences.

Appendix

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AI: Sample Media Advisory

Organization's logo

MEDIA ADVISORY

Put at top: **DATE BEING RELEASED**

CONTACT NAME *(name of person(s) who can answer questions)*

OFFICE PHONE

CELL PHONE

EMAIL

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MAYOR TO ANNOUNCE NEW SEAT BELT CAMPAIGN

What: Press conference to announce new seat belt campaign

Who: Mayor John Smith will announce seat belt campaign and take questions in press conference

When: Time.....Day.....Date.....Year

Where: Place of announcement and address

###

A2: Sample Fact Sheet

Organization's logo

FACT SHEET

DATE OF RELEASE

CONTACT NAME (*name of person(s) who can answer questions*)

OFFICE PHONE

CELL PHONE

EMAIL

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

A HUNDRED LIVES COULD HAVE BEEN SAVED WITH SEAT BELTS

- **XXXX Americans unnecessarily lost their lives last year because they were not wearing seat belts. A hundred of those were from XYZ city, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation.**
- **The XYZ victims ranged in age from 3 months to 75 years. None were strapped in.**
- **None of XYZ city's 12 area divisions were spared deaths, although 40 percent did occur in the city's four northeast sections, according to Department of Transportation data.**
- **In the last month the victims have been:**
 - **Name, age, address, location of accident.**
 - **Name, age, address, location of accident.**

Continue with more background on issue.

###

A3: Sample Press Release

Organization's logo

PRESS RELEASE

DATE OF RELEASE

CONTACT NAME *(name of person(s) who can answer questions)*

OFFICE PHONE

CELL PHONE

EMAIL

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MAYOR: SEAT BELTS SAVE LIVES

(Write a headline to summarize the information. Keep it at one to two lines.)

(In the first paragraph answer the who, what, where, when, why and how of your information.)

Location of announcement *(where)* – **Mayor John Smith** *(who)* **called today** *(when)* **in a press conference at city hall** *(where)* **for mandatory seat belt usage by all citizens driving or riding in cars** *(what)* **beginning January 1** *(when)* **to keep citizens safer** *(why)*.

(In the second paragraph, substantiate your first paragraph with more detail. You can also give a quote.)

“A hundred citizens of XYZ *(detail)* **would be alive today if they had been wearing seat belts. We should do all we can to ensure another hundred unnecessary deaths don't occur,”** *(quote)* **Smith said.**

(In the third paragraph, give more detail or a quote if one isn't used in the second paragraph. Give context of the information being given.)

The U.S. Department of Transportation cited XYZ earlier this week with having the nation's highest automobile death statistics for non-seat belt use.... *(And continue with more context and background on the issue.)*

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