Public Affairs Reporting

Chapter 15
News Media as “the Fourth Estate”

- Edmund Burke, a British politician/political thinker, coined this phrase around 1800
- Refers to the three traditional British classes (or estates): nobility, clergy, and the commoners
- Burke said in the reporters’ gallery sat a “fourth estate” more powerful than the other three
- Recognizes the power of the press to inform and shape popular opinion on public affairs
Public Affairs Reporting refers to coverage of:

- Government activities: federal, state, local
- Government officials (elected officials and others) and agencies
- Politics
- Police and crime
- Criminal and civil court cases
- Public safety issues
- Accidents
- Community news
- Schools and education
Attributes of Public Affairs Reporters:

- Diligence
- Knowledge of sources
- Knowledge of how “the system” works
- Accuracy
- Ability to write clear explanations
Covering the “cop shop” is often the first assignment many newspaper and broadcast reporters receive.

This is an excellent training ground because:

- It forces young reporters to learn the community, both geographically and sociologically.
- It trains reporters in news values and in the need for accuracy.
- It gives reporters and opportunity to develop sources.
Developing Police Sources

- Be aware: police officers are often wary of reporters and of news coverage.
- They are concerned that coverage may appear sensational, unfair, inaccurate, or will portray police in a bad light.

- For their part, reporters may see police officers as tight-lipped and secretive, using claims of privacy or investigative necessity to keep interesting and important information from the public.
Building Trust on the Police Beat

- The best way reporters build trust with police officers is to prove their professionalism by reporting on matters accurately and thoroughly and by treating sources fairly.
- Reporters can better get the information they need for stories by developing good work habits.
This can involve:

- Following a regular pattern for checking sources such as police reports, jail records, the medical examiner’s office and the police department’s public information office
- Other helpful sources can be police union leaders, prosecuting attorneys, and bail bond agents
- Monitoring police and fire scanners and knowing the language and codes can get reporters to crime scenes quickly
Following the Paper Trail...

- Police blotter
- Incident reports
- Arrest warrants
- Search warrants
- Affidavits
- Arrest reports
- Jail booking records
- Autopsy reports
- Medical examiner’s reports
- Accident reports
- Criminal history info
A word of caution:

- Reporters must know libel law
- You can report that someone has been charged with a crime
- However you cannot say or imply the person is guilty until after that person has been convicted by a judge or jury
- Criminal defendants in the U.S. are presumed innocent and have a right to be tried in a court of law, not by a mob on a street corner or by their local newspaper or television news broadcast
Note how the following story does not report that the defendant committed a crime:

A 27-year-old woman is suing a downtown hotel because she was raped in the hotel’s parking garage on her wedding night.

On Tuesday, the woman filed a suit in Circuit Court, charging that the Grand Hotel failed to adequately protect its guests.

The hotel’s general manager, Lillian DeLoy, responded that the hotel’s security is adequate.

According to the woman’s attorney, James R. Lopez, the rape took place in front of an empty security office—a glassed-in booth with a view of the entire garage.

The attack occurred when the bride returned to her parked car for a suitcase at about 11 p.m. Police arrested a suspect a short time later.

The suspect, Myron Jaco, 18, of Pine Street, has been charged with sexual battery and is scheduled to stand trial next month.
Checklist for Public Affairs Reporting

- Police, Crimes and Accidents
  - Spend time at the police station and talk to officers; try to learn their concerns
  - Get as much information as possible from the investigating officers, witnesses, victims and suspects
  - Learn what records are available at the police station and what information they contain and do not contain
  - When writing crime stories, avoid implying that a suspect is guilty
  - Avoid referring to a suspect’s race or religion unless it is clearly relevant to the story
Learn how your local governments are organized, what their powers and limitations are and how the various governmental units interact

Study the budgets of local government units, and learn how governments raise their money

Develop a routine for visiting the local government offices on your beat, and become familiar with the people who work in those offices (sources)

Learn what public records are kept in each office and how to use them

Go beyond covering school board meetings; visit schools and talk to principals, teachers, parents and students
Courts Checklist

- Remember that the state files criminal charges against people suspected of violating criminal laws, whereas civil cases are usually between private parties.
- Learn how state courts are organized, the names of the various courts and what kinds of cases they hear.
- Learn how court records are kept and how to find the records on any particular case.
- Do not imply that a defendant in a criminal case is guilty; only the jury, or the judge in a bench trial, can decide that.
- Be skeptical of allegations and damage claims that appear in civil complaints; they present only one side of the story.
- Be alert to the possibility that a plea bargain or a settlement will end a case before or during a trial.
Homework for next class:

- Using the police report given you, write a news article, approximately 250 words, about these arrests
- Be sure to attribute to the police (or deputies) all of the things they claim the suspects did
- Include a headline and byline and all of the other regular article format guidelines