

Covering Washington

Many Newspapers Rely on the Phone, Press Releases

by Martin Donsky

WASHINGTON--North Carolina has a reputation here as a training ground for fine journalists. Newspapers like *The New York Times*, *The Washington Star*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and others are stocked with reporters and editors who began their careers on small Tar Heel papers. Many of them have won Pulitzer Prizes. North Carolina does not, however, have a good reputation for the way its newspapers cover Washington. If anything, just the opposite is true. Good coverage is the exception, rather than the rule.

Only three daily papers, *The Charlotte Observer*, *The Winston-Salem Journal*, and *The Raleigh News and Observer*, have full-time correspondents in Washington. The state's third largest newspaper, *The Greensboro Daily News*, which has a daily circulation of about 80,000, closed its Washington bureau in early 1977. Daily newspapers in other states much smaller than papers like *The Durham Morning Herald* (circulation 42,000) and *The Fayetteville Observer* (43,000) have reporters stationed in Washington.

A few papers and some television stations use part-time "stringers" for specific assignments, but the work is piecemeal, and the "stringers" rarely have the time to keep adequately informed about state events. As a result, North Carolina citizens find out little about what their elected officials do in Washington from independent, objective sources. Instead, the politicians control the flow of information.

Some of the newspapers, especially the smaller dailies and weeklies, rely primarily on press releases written by the congressmen themselves. It is not uncommon to pick up a daily paper and read a "news" story written by the staff of a congressman, who may give it a few personal touches at the end.

"That's the way it worked 200 years ago," said Gene Marlowe, Washington correspondent for *The Winston-Salem Journal*. "Congressmen sent letters back home to newspapers, and the newspapers ran

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them. The papers are still doing it."

The "news" sent back home by the congressman usually reflects the politician's interpretation of events, and may not coincide with what actually happened. For example, newspapers regularly print announcements of federal grant awards. The announcements, particularly when they come at election time, are made by a representative or a senator. The announcement often makes it seem that the congressman was responsible for obtaining the grant. Some federal dollars are doled out on a discretionary basis, and the political clout of a legislator is at times a key factor. But increasingly, grants are awarded by formula, and the congressman has nothing to do with it (he may have even voted against spending the money for the entire program).

But---and most readers outside of Washington don't realize this---federal agencies traditionally give congressmen advance notification on all grants, primarily so the legislator can score a few political points with the folks back home. (This also enables the agency to score a few political points with the congressman).

North Carolina's elected officials in Washington do have contact with journalists back home. A politician visiting his district often will make a courtesy call at the newspaper office. And there is the telephone when the congressman is in Washington. (Roy Parker, editor of *The Fayetteville Times*, described the contact between his paper and Rep. Charles Rose, whose district includes Fayetteville, by saying, "He's got the WATS line and we've got the WATS line.")

But even Parker, a former Washington correspondent for *The Raleigh News and Observer*, would agree that coverage by telephone or local interview leaves a lot to be desired. While it is possible for a newspaper to report what a congressman says he will do, it is difficult to watch how a congressman carries out his assignment. "You've got to be up here to really see what goes on," said Rick Gray, a reporter with *The Greensboro Daily News* who is in Washington on a political science fellowship.

The three reporters who work in Washington

full-time for Tar Heel papers acknowledge that their coverage is highly selective. There are simply too many issues for one person to cover. "Several days will go by when I know something is going on but I just can't get to it," said Marlowe.

There are several reasons for the lack of coverage. Not surprisingly, money is probably the chief one. "I'd love to have someone up there, especially with all the military stuff going on," said Fayetteville's Parker, whose readership includes the thousands of soldiers stationed at neighboring Ft. Bragg. But, in Parker's view, it simply costs too much to open a bureau in Washington. "Money, that's all it is," he said.

Several analysts estimated that a one-man (or woman) bureau probably would cost a newspaper a minimum of \$35,000. That includes a decent salary for the reporter, office rent and supplies, and communications costs. The cost of a bureau here should also take into account the higher cost of living for Washington. For example, *The News and Observer*, cognizant of that, gives its reporter a housing allowance.

For \$35,000, a paper the size of *The Fayetteville Times* or *The Durham Morning Herald* can hire two veteran reporters to work on the city desk. Or, they can stretch it and use the money for three "beginners." And, many editors would agree, additional manpower in the home office is a continuing goal.

But money isn't the only reason. Some editors are simply not interested to any significant degree in what happens in Washington. When he makes his visits back home, Rep. James Broyhill regularly finds that editors in his congressional district have little to ask about what he's doing in Washington.

Yet in the last 10 years, Washington's impact on the average citizen has increased substantially. In 1970, for example, federal grants to state and local governments totaled about \$23 billion. For the fiscal year that begins Oct. 1, 1979, federal grants to state and local governments will total about \$82 billion. And a good chunk of that money is sent to North Carolina.

Recognizing the increasing importance of what happens in Washington, most of the states, including North Carolina, have opened offices here to keep an eye on legislation and politics and to lobby. Most newspapers have not followed that lead.

Unfortunately, increased Washington coverage probably wouldn't make that much difference in terms of the all-important "bottom line" in the news media--circulation for print media and audience for television and radio. "What a TV station has on from Washington is not going to add one viewer," said Jack Williams, who freelances for WBTV in Charlotte.

There are, however, some ways coverage could be improved, without "over-taxing" the financial resources of the dozens of medium and small newspapers in the state. Some enterprising journalists in Washington have set up bureaus that specialize in regional coverage. Ohio News Service, for example,

provides stories about the Ohio congressional delegation and other federal activities that affect the state. States News Service, a growing operation, provides coverage for several newspapers in Connecticut, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

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It would cost money, obviously, but a North Carolina editor anxious for news from Washington might be able to contract with one of the existing news services. Or, what would prevent editors from several papers in the state from banding together to form their own news service? Each paper could be assessed a certain fee, based perhaps on size, to finance the operation.

One news service in Washington was initially started through a grant from a private foundation. Perhaps a combination of private dollars from various newspapers and foundation grants could get a Tar Heel news service under way.

It will take some doing. Editors would want strict assurances that acceptance of foundation money would in no way indicate acceptance of any foundation views about what is and is not news. Foundation sponsors would also have to realize that, and keep completely out of the news operation (even if the news operation came across a potentially critical story involving the foundation).

Newspaper editors would have to cast off some suspicions about working with their competitors. They'd also have to be willing to make the financial commitment. And they'd have to work out an arrangement that enabled all papers to share the news. (The reporters working in Washington could provide two kinds of service--regular news stories that all the papers could use and special pieces for certain papers.) Most importantly, support would be necessary from the larger papers in the state without Washington reporters--papers like *The Durham Morning Herald*, *The Greensboro Daily News*, and *The Fayetteville Times*. Involvement by those papers would provide the financial backbone, and enable other, smaller papers to get involved. Solid leadership by an editor or publisher would be required to get the project going.

The enterprise would be well worth undertaking. It would give North Carolina readers, listeners and viewers the kind of Washington coverage they deserve. And North Carolina's journalism community would provide another solid piece of evidence that it deserves its national reputation. □