



# IN THE PRESS

## *When the Legislature's In Session, Does Other News Take a Back Seat?*

by Jack Betts

*This regular feature of Insight focuses on how the news media—newspapers, television, and radio—cover public affairs in North Carolina. In this column, Insight examines whether the Capital Press Corps ignores other state government news and concentrates solely on the legislature when the N.C. General Assembly is in session.*

One day last June, Jim Sheppard took the elevator down to the fourth floor of the Archdale Building in the downtown state government complex and walked into a conference room filled with state officials. He wouldn't need the releases he had prepared a week earlier, which announced the first meeting of a blue-ribbon panel to determine whether North Carolina should start up an environmental indicators program.<sup>1</sup> A veteran state public information officer, Sheppard wouldn't have to answer any questions from the press, either, because no reporters showed up. Those reporters, as Sheppard had anticipated, wouldn't be anywhere else that day but covering the N.C. General Assembly, en route to its longest session ever—more than seven months.

So it goes in Raleigh, where there are two packs of note—the Wolfpack of N.C. State University in west Raleigh, and the press pack of the Capital Press Corps downtown. When you're looking for reporters during a legislative session, finding them is a snap. Just drop by the big white building on Jones Street and there they'll be—as

hostage to the legislative session as staff members, the cafeteria crew, and the legislators themselves. Reporters grouse about the long hours and constant grind of covering the legislature from start to finish—215 days from January to August in 1989—but few of them are able to break away regularly to do the sort of coverage of other state government stories that occur throughout the year, whether the legislature is in session or not.

This pack journalism prevails largely because, in North Carolina, the General Assembly is the most powerful branch of government and by far the most accessible. Stories are easy to get. Legislators seek out reporters, doling out juicy quotes and swapping hot rumors. Most meetings are wide open, and not even the wiliest legislator can hide from a reporter for long. And it's a lot easier to cover the legislature, where all 170 members and all the staff are located in just two adjacent buildings, than the executive and judicial branches—which are spread out in 95 buildings in downtown Raleigh alone and in hundreds more in the rest of the state. And, of course, the fact is that reporters stick to the General Assembly because that's where their editors want them to be most days. When reporters aren't there, editors want to know why not.

"Reporters are mainly tied up with the legislature when it's in session, even when there are sexy issues out there to be covered, like the Mobil Oil thing," says Seth Effron, Raleigh correspondent

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for the *Greensboro News & Record*. "It's gotten covered somewhat [mostly by environmental reporters], but it would have been more closely scrutinized if the legislature had not been in session [when Mobil Oil proposed to drill for gas off North Carolina's coast]." The same thing goes for the state's choice of a radioactive waste disposal site operator, Effron adds. "There would have been more intensive coverage of that issue if the legislature had not been in session." The *Winston-Salem Journal*, the state's environmental watchdog, had covered the story for more than a year, but other news organizations weren't giving it as much attention—especially during the General Assembly.

Graham Wilson, a former Raleigh correspondent for WBTV in Charlotte and now a government spokesman at the Department of Crime Control and Public Safety, agreed with Effron's assessment about the legislature captivating reporters' attention. "We had a feeling that we were tied to the legislature somewhat when it was in session," says Wilson. That prevented him from covering other state stories or getting out of town to cover statewide controversies. "It did affect coverage. When the legislature wasn't in, it was one less thing to worry about."

Adds Ferrel Guillory, government editor of *The News and Observer* of Raleigh: "When the legislature is in town, it tends to dominate [news coverage]. But the fact is that even when the legislature is not in town, we don't do the day-to-day coverage of state government as well as we should. That's not a problem specific only to North Carolina. I don't think *The Washington Post* covers government as well as it should, or *The New York Times*. Covering the bureaucracy, the everyday workings of government, is really difficult. It has gotten so big, it has gotten so arcane, that you tend to go where the flashes of activity are."

The phenomenon does not go unnoticed in the Governor's office. Phil Kirk, until recently Gov. Jim Martin's chief of staff and himself a former reporter for *The Salisbury Post*, observes that most newspapers and other media outlets don't put enough reporters on government news, and when the General Assembly is in session, that's the only game in town. "I think the state government and legislative coverage personnel assigned by the media are so small, relatively speaking, that they have to concentrate on either the legislature or the rest of state government," and reporters regularly choose the legislature, Kirk says. "I have defi-

nately seen that happen each time the General Assembly is in town. They have to cover what is hot at the moment, and that's the legislature. We expect the administration to be more closely scrutinized when the legislature is not in town."

Good reasons abound for sticking with the legislature. "There are legitimate reasons that the General Assembly demands all of our time," observes Danny Lineberry, Raleigh correspondent for the *Durham Morning Herald*. "One, no other branch of state government has as much impact on the daily lives of North Carolina's citizens—how much they pay for gasoline, how much their driver's licenses cost, how much automobile liability insurance they must purchase. Second, I think it's our responsibility to tell the people what their elected representatives are doing, how they are voting (or not voting), where they stand on issues . . . . In short, given the limited resources available to news organizations and the potential impact of its actions, I think the General Assembly deserves the intense coverage—even if it means other areas go uncovered."

Adds columnist Paul T. O'Connor, "Given its current size, the Raleigh press corps does a greater service by covering one branch well rather than covering all three in a very shallow manner."

Running with the pack has always been a danger for Raleigh reporters, whether they work for a Raleigh outlet or an out-of-town organization. Most reporters are cognizant of the problems that stem from running with the pack—covering the same stories, missing others, forgoing the risky, boring enterprise of digging into the details of a policy issue in favor of the tried-and-true routine of events coverage, guaranteed to get the story air time or page-one play. Most members of the Capital Press Corps wouldn't miss a gubernatorial press conference—held on Thursday mornings in the Administration Building—for all the beer in Beaufort. While those conferences don't often produce front-page-quality news, they always produce something that reporters can write about, especially stories of confrontation between the Governor and legislature when it's in session. But stories of such confrontation, while dramatic enough to sound important, help the reading and listening public far less than aggressive coverage of other public affairs.

Timothy Crouse described the pack phenomenon in his 1972 screed, *The Boys On The Bus*. Crouse wrote of "womblike conditions that gave rise" to pack journalism, and described the pack as "hierarchical as a chess set" and "divided into

cliques.”<sup>2</sup> Crouse could have been writing about the General Assembly, where reporters and legislators spend too much time in captivity together, and the Capital Press Corps, which has its own hierarchy (see sidebar, p. 66). “Everybody denounces pack journalism, including the men who form the pack,” wrote Crouse. “Any self-respecting journalist would sooner endorse incest than come out in favor of pack journalism.”

In North Carolina, the pack rarely congregates for election coverage. It convenes more often in legislative coverage. And much of the legislative coverage in 1989 was about the squabble between the House and the Senate and the Governor about *how to fund* the \$9 billion highway funding package—by a factor of 20, the largest road-building and public works program in the state’s history.<sup>3</sup> But almost missing entirely in the coverage—as *The News and Observer* was careful to point out in a short item in its “Under the Dome” column<sup>4</sup>—was much pointed discussion of *whether there was a need* for all that road-building. There were exceptions, of course. Ferrel Guillory of *The News and Observer* pondered how to approach the subject in an editorial-page column,<sup>5</sup> and columnist O’Connor wondered whether education had become a second or third priority behind roads. Most reporters did do stories when Sen. Marshall Rauch (D-Gastonia) worried aloud about the need to spend so much money, but lacking from the public prints was any detailed reporting on the need for the projects. While *local* road needs often were well covered by newspapers, the media generally seemed to accept the conventional legislative wisdom—and the Martin administration’s assertion—that the new N.C. *intrastate* roads package was essential, and focused instead on how to pay for the monumental project. Ted Harrison, a public television producer and the most experienced hand in the press corps, notes that road needs were determined by state transportation officials a year earlier, and that the press never really covered the story in a comprehensive way. “That part of the battle—the needs—was fought out long before we as a rat pack got hold of the carcass, and no one wanted to play catch-up,” says Harrison.

Guillory, who helped restructure The Old Reliable’s 1989 coverage in an effort to avoid missing the sort of stories that are easy to overlook during a legislative session, concedes that some stories don’t get enough attention when the big show is in town. “I know there are agencies, pieces of government, that we don’t poke into well

enough. There’s the [N.C.] Agriculture Department, certain elements of the Department of Commerce [now renamed the Department of Economic and Community Development], and any number of government agencies,” said Guillory. “But I wouldn’t argue to divert coverage from the legislature to something else. I’d argue that we need to pay attention to the other two branches of government more.”

Newspapers in particular have made efforts to get those sorts of stories and to avoid the pack. In the late 1970s, for instance, *The Charlotte Observer* had a model arrangement for its Raleigh bureau. Three full-time, veteran reporters sought to do stories that no one else was covering, and their product was the envy of other news operations. That office had one of the state’s top investigative reporters in Howard Covington, one of the top political reporters in Ned Cline, and an experienced general assignment reporter in Susan Jetton. That trio covered a wide variety of stories no one else was doing—and all this came at a time (1978 and 1979) when the state budget was much smaller (less than \$4 billion a year in 1979 as opposed to \$10 billion in 1989) and when the state had less responsibility for programs and the federal government had more. The *Observer*, the state’s largest newspaper, and other papers have maintained a bureau of two reporters in Raleigh in the 1980s, but the continued growth in state government would justify sending *more* reporters, not *fewer*, to cover the state. In a Raleigh office, three is not a crowd, given the size of government.

Today, most reporters make an effort to get away from the legislative building, if only to preserve their sanity during the seemingly interminable sessions. Guillory says *The News and Observer* made pre-session plans to spring loose Bill Krueger and others for stories on day care centers and prisons, among other subjects. *The Charlotte Observer* tries to send reporters from its Charlotte staff to Raleigh to regularly supplement government coverage, allowing Raleigh Bureau reporters like John Drescher to pursue, for instance, a story on a special fund that paid for a cook at the University of North Carolina president’s home in Chapel Hill.<sup>6</sup> Effron and his editors make it a practice to plan on at least one long-term project during each session of the General Assembly. In the middle of the 1989 session, when the House and Senate were at loggerheads over a host of issues, Effron took several weeks away from the General Assembly to do the painstaking and time-consuming research

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to find out how much money the state was spending to employ public information officers (PIOs). Their job sometimes was to answer public inquiries, and sometimes, it seemed to Effron, to be apologists and press agents for their bosses. The cost for this cadre of PIOs wasn't available any other way than through poring over computer printouts and tracking down the spokespersons for each of scores of state agencies. The grand total, in an article published June 18, 1989, came to more than \$9.2 million for 362 official government PIOs on the payroll.<sup>7</sup>

Effron's story was unusual not so much because of its importance or its originality, but because the paper was willing to devote so much time to a single investigative story when there was plenty of other news cover. That story came at the height of the General Assembly, when, as the late Sen. Ralph Scott (D-Alamance) would have put it, the throat-cutting had just begun. Most other reporters were still in the traces covering the budget process, the debate over teacher pay raises, or the highway funding imbroglio. And here was Effron, blithely ignoring the legislature to do what was, after all, a splashy story guaranteed to make the taxpayers' teeth gnash. Other reporters were envious as well. "Where's Effron and what's he doing, anyway?" wondered a fellow scribe while Effron was off chasing his story.

The Greensboro paper had been planning to do that story for some time, says Effron. "Some [legislative] issues might have gone uncovered," concedes Effron, "but the *News & Record* as much as any newspaper has been making an effort in not having its own reporters duplicate others, especially the wire services. We look at the AP (The Associated Press) as another staffer for us, and we use them."

So, the paper used more copy than normal from the AP and stories from its other Raleigh reporter to cover the legislature while Effron pursued the story on PIOs. Little, if anything, in legislative coverage was sacrificed, Effron says, and the *News & Record* got a big Sunday spread out of it.

"Still, I think there are parts of government that do go uncovered," Effron says. "I don't want to imply that people get away with murder. But there are stories of significance that don't get written—changes in eligibility for government programs, how the state day care commission is handling the question of what to do about when kids get sick, how the state's investment portfolio

is being managed."

Martin's former Chief of Staff Phil Kirk—who became president of N.C. Citizens for Business and Industry on December 1—agrees, but only to a point. "I think it's more a quantitative thing. They [readers] get the information [about other state government stories] ultimately, but I don't think they get it nearly so soon or in such quantity when the General Assembly is in session."

While accepting the notion that some stories may go unreported while the legislature commands the attention of most newspapers, Guillory points out that the General Assembly is, after all, an important story—particularly for those newspapers that don't maintain full-time offices in Raleigh. "I don't blame *The Asheville Citizen* or *The Fayetteville Observer* for paying attention to the legislature, because this is a democracy," Guillory says. "The legislature is an expression of democracy, and there ought to be a lot of coverage. But you do need to find some balance, and I'd argue that we have got to do a better job overall. One of the real issues in journalism these days is whether there is a diminishing of government news and political news of all kinds. There's a danger that we will *People* magazine ourselves too much."

Finding that proper balance—between what the public is interested in reading and what they should know about—is a journalistic challenge, and one that reporters sometimes worry about when the legislature seems to go on interminably without making progress. "There are times when I feel like I'm being paid to watch a hamster cage," notes Effron. "Sure, there's a lot of motion on that wheel, and yeah, we can tell the reader that there was movement today on that wheel, but when the end of the session comes, it still seems like we spent a lot of time spinning our wheels when we could have been out covering other stories."

Aggressive coverage of state government begins with a commitment to hard news and not to media consultants and decorators who insist on fluff and soft news. One way to provide that coverage would be to commit more resources—to assign more reporters to state government coverage—and to insist on more interpretive reporting of, say, trends in regulatory issues at the N.C. Utilities Commission, or whether the Milk Commission is an anachronism, or whether the state's administrative rules bureaucracy is a shambles. The state's larger out-of-town newspapers, as well as the state's bigger television stations, could as-

sign more reporters to Raleigh to keep up with the big increases in state government—growth that has been fueled in part by the federal government's ceding of much responsibility to the states in the past eight years as the growth of parts of the federal budget has slowed. And those reporters should be schooled in the arts of aggressive, hard-nosed, and independent reporting—and not just more reporting of the same old spinning wheels.



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>For more on this subject, see Bill Finger, "The State of the Environment: Do We Need a North Carolina Environmental Index?," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 11, No. 1, October 1988, pp. 2-29. The N.C. Center for Public Policy Re-

search proposed the index to chart changes in the quality of the state's environment. Gov. James G. Martin embraced the idea in his 1989 Second Inaugural Address and most newspapers mentioned the index in their next-day coverage, but since then there has been little mention of the subject while the Department of Environment, Health, and Natural Resources has made steady progress in developing the index.

<sup>2</sup>Timothy Crouse, *The Boys On The Bus*, Ballantine Books (New York), 1972, pp. 7-8.

<sup>3</sup>Chapter 692 (HB 399) of the 1989 Session Laws.

<sup>4</sup>"Some road plans in bill questioned," *The News and Observer* of Raleigh, July 30, 1989, p. 1A.

<sup>5</sup>Ferrel Guillory, "Massive road building, but missing questions," *The News and Observer* of Raleigh, Aug 4, 1989, 1989, p. 10A.

<sup>6</sup>John Drescher, "UNC System's Set-Aside From Grants Questioned," *The Charlotte Observer*, June 25, 1989, p. 1A.

<sup>7</sup>Seth Effron, "Taxes paying for what government voices say," *Greensboro News & Record*, June 18, 1989, p. A-1.

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<sup>5</sup>Don Follmer, spokesman for the N.C. Department of Environment, Health, and Natural Resources (then the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development), as quoted in "Court made the right ruling," the *Winston-Salem Journal*, May 8, 1989, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup>In *The Matter of A Civil Penalty*, 324 N.C. 373 at 384, 379 SE 2d 31 at 37 (1989).

<sup>7</sup>*Cannon v. Miller*, 71 N.C. App. 460, 322 SE 2d 780 (1984); vacated by the N.C. Supreme Court, 313 N.C. 324, 327 SE 2d 888 (1985).

<sup>8</sup>The N.C. Court of Appeals was created by constitutional amendment in 1965 and began with six judges in 1967. The Court was increased to nine judges in 1969 and to its current total of 12 in 1977. Since its creation, 30 judges have been members of the Court, and 18 have been members since the Court was enlarged to 12 in 1977. By contrast, the seven-member N.C. Supreme Court, has also had 18 members since 1977—and seven of the 18 had previously been members of the Court of Appeals. Of the current

seven justices on the Supreme Court, four—Associate Justices Burley Mitchell, Willis Whichard, Harry Martin, and John Webb—served on the Court of Appeals prior to joining the high court.

<sup>9</sup>*State v. Andrews*, 52 N.C. App. 26, 277 SE 2d 857 (1981).

<sup>10</sup>*State v. Perry*, 52 N.C. App. 48, 278 SE 2d 273 (1981).

<sup>11</sup>*State v. Garner*, 55 N.C. App. 192, 284 SE 2d 733 (1981).

<sup>12</sup>*State v. Perry*, 305 N.C. 225, 287 SE 2d 872 (1982).

<sup>13</sup>*Johnson v. Ruark Obstetrics*, 89 N.C. App. 154, 365 SE 2d 909 (1988).

<sup>14</sup>*Edwards v. Advo Systems, Inc.*, 97 N.C. App. 154 (1989) 376 SE 2d 765 (1989).

<sup>15</sup>*Williams v. International Paper Co.*, 89 N.C. App. 256, 365 SE 2d 84 (1988).

<sup>16</sup>*Pollard v. Smith*, 90 N.C. App. 585, 365 SE 2d 84 (1988).

<sup>17</sup>*N.C.N.B. v. Virginia Carolina Builders*, 307 N.C. 563, 299 SE 2d 629 (1983).

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