



State Government Media Lines Pose Dilemma for N.C. Broadcasters

by Adam Hochberg

This regular Insight feature examines how the news media—newspaper, television, and radio—cover public affairs topics in North Carolina. This installment discusses the use of media lines—answering machines carrying a prerecorded message as a news source.

A practice by several state government agencies has North Carolina journalists facing a dilemma—whether to use prerecorded statements in news stories and, if used, how to present them to the public. The agencies have begun operating special telephone lines carrying tidbits for the press. Reporters who call one of these so-called *media lines* reach an answering machine and hear a prerecorded message from an agency official—either an excerpt from a public speech or news conference, or a statement recorded especially for the media line about an issue in the news.

The media lines—also known as news lines or actuality lines—mainly are targeted at radio news reporters, who are encouraged to broadcast the prerecorded statements in the form of *sound bites* on their newscasts. Newspaper reporters also occasionally call the lines and quote the prerecorded statements in their stories. State officials insist the lines help reporters cover news from state government, but some journalists refuse to use them, fearful that government officials who use media lines might present a biased account of news events.

Are these new-tech news sources a boon or a bane? North Carolina journalists increasingly are having to confront this question. At least five state

agencies—the departments of Transportation, Correction, and Crime Control and Public Safety, the Lieutenant Governor's Office, and the General Assembly—have used media lines in the past two years. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill news bureau also operates a special line for the media.

Politicians around the nation, however, have been using the devices for more than a decade. A White House spokesman says the Carter Administration began the first presidential media line, and Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush have continued the practice. The private sector also increasingly relies on media lines to get its message to the public. For instance, the American Medical Association uses one to distribute sound bites on health issues, and Burlington Industries put a media line in place to distribute sound bites during its 1987 effort to stave off a hostile takeover.

Among North Carolina government agencies, the Department of Transportation operated the first media line in the early 1980s, then discontinued it for several years before resurrecting it in 1989. Bill Jones, a DOT spokesman, says his agency's media line saves reporters the trouble of trying to track down officials for interviews, and also saves officials the trouble of having to submit to several interviews on the same subject for different news organizations. "The old fashioned way would be to send out a press release," Jones said. "That

Adam Hochberg is a broadcast journalist who covers state government for public radio stations in North Carolina.

would require the radio stations to call in and then get an interview with somebody here. That would cost them more time and cause them another phone call."

However, while telephone media lines can save time, exclusive reliance on prerecorded messages denies reporters the chance to ask questions of government officials, follow up on provocative points, or acquire background material that can help them understand and report the story thoroughly. In contrast to a spontaneous interview or news conference, comments on a telephone media line usually are carefully drafted and sanitized to reflect favorably on public officials and make them sound their best.

DOT officials place on their media line audio excerpts from Board of Transportation meetings and department news conferences. The line also is used to provide sound bites on breaking news stories from the department, such as the October 1990 collapse of part of the Herbert C. Bonner Bridge, which spans Oregon Inlet in Dare County.

The Department of Correction uses its media line to provide daily updates on the state prison population. Correction Secretary Aaron Johnson also used the line extensively before the Nov. 6, 1990, election to distribute sound bites voicing his support for the prison construction bond issue, which was approved by the voters by only 582 votes.¹

Lt. Gov. Jim Gardner, who heads Gov. Jim Martin's Drug Cabinet, often uses his media line to issue sound bites on the state's anti-drug campaign. The Department of Crime Control and Public Safety sometimes puts its line into operation to distribute sound bites of Secretary Joe Dean, but the department also uses the line to issue logistics information to reporters covering breaking news stories. For example, television reporters covering the fall 1990 repatriation of Kuwaiti evacuees at Raleigh-Durham International Airport could call the line for recorded information on where to park their satellite trucks.

The General Assembly information office has operated a media line with legislative news while the legislature is in session, and the news bureau at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

covers stories on its line ranging from board of trustees meetings to research projects underway on campus.

State officials say the cost of operating a media line is low. The technology amounts to nothing more than a telephone answering machine, and the expense is limited to a dedicated phone line and the personnel cost of putting the message on each day. At the Department of Transportation, for example, the annual expense is less than \$1,000, according to Paul Worley, a former DOT information officer who helped resurrect the media line in 1989. "If we returned phone calls to every small station, our expenses would be more in phone calls and time," Worley said.

The state agencies do not maintain records on who calls their media lines, but Graham Wilson, the director of public affairs for the Department of

Crime Control and Public Safety, says small radio stations outside Raleigh seem to be the most frequent users. "A lot of the smaller stations don't have enough reporters to send them out into the field," Wilson says. "They have to get their news over the phone."

Indeed, the growth of media lines in North Carolina follows a period

when many radio stations cut back their news staffs. It's not uncommon for radio stations now to employ just one or two people in their news departments, especially in smaller cities.²

Bruce Naegelen, the one-person news department at WBTB Radio in Beaufort, says he often relies on media lines. Because he anchors newscasts and hosts a daily talk show, Naegelen rarely can come to Raleigh to cover state government news in person, and he says he sometimes can't get state officials to return his phone calls. "Initially, when I'm following a story, I'll put a call in to Raleigh to try to get the top dog," Naegelen says. "If I can't get him, I'll work my way down, and if I can't get anyone, I might rely on the machine."

Naegelen says overall, the media lines "do a fairly decent job" covering the news. Still, he's sometimes cynical about whether the state agencies that operate the lines go out of their way to make themselves look good. "It's sort of like news releases," says Naegelen. "You can't really take it at face value."

■ ■
"A lot of the smaller stations don't have enough reporters to send them out into the field. They have to get their news over the phone."
■ ■

—GRAHAM WILSON

DEPARTMENT OF CRIME CONTROL AND
PUBLIC SAFETY

"It's up to us to determine what we think would reflect best on the Department of Transportation, and that would be what we put on the [media] line."

—BILL JONES
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

While small radio stations seem to be the most frequent users of media lines, larger news organizations also use them. Both *The Charlotte Observer* and the *Greensboro News & Record* occasionally rely on the University of North Carolina media line for quotes on university board of trustees and faculty council meetings.

Greensboro News & Record higher education reporter Don Patterson says the meetings rarely generate enough news to justify a trip to Chapel Hill to cover them in person. "We just can't go running off to Chapel Hill every time they have a faculty council meeting or a trustees meeting," says Patterson. He says the media line provides a "fall back" system, so he can still cover a news-worthy meeting he does not attend.

Pam Kelley, the higher education reporter at *The Charlotte Observer*, says she calls the University of North Carolina news bureau media line for quotes from university trustees meetings when she can't attend them in person. She adds, though, that she only uses the media line for stories on non-controversial issues and never relies on it as the sole source for a story. "Frankly, I've dealt with those [news bureau] people long enough that I can trust them to tell me the truth," Kelley says. "I don't think they would try to obfuscate something."

In some cases, though, media line accounts of news events do differ from those of reporters who witness the events themselves. When Gov. Jim Martin appeared at a Raleigh ceremony to inaugurate the new Carolinian passenger train line in May 1990, he was heckled by protesters who opposed his policies on hazardous waste disposal. "The Carolinian, en route from Rocky Mount to Charlotte, chugged into Raleigh greeted not only by well-wishers, but by hazardous waste protesters," began Allison Taylor's on-the-scene story for WPTF Radio in Raleigh.³

Taylor included in her report a sound bite of Martin trying to shout over the protesters' chants. "It would be ungracious of me if I didn't acknowledge you," Martin yelled to them, "but since you're not going to listen to what I'm saying anyway,

Media Line Sampler: A Sound Bite Cornucopia

Journalists who want to sample from the state's media lines face a broad array of choices, but the lines are generally limited to a single perspective. Lt. Gov. Jim Gardner's media line ran these remarks from the state's second-ranking Republican when the Democrat-dominated Council of State blocked the selection of state-owned property in Butner for a hazardous waste disposal facility:

"The responsible thing that we should have done today was to act on it. This problem of hazardous waste is a growing problem. We didn't do that. I think they took an irrespon-

sible, easy way out and dumped it—'they' being Democrats on the Council of State—dumped it on the Democratic legislature. That's going to now take months. Every single hour, hazardous waste is building up. All we need is for South Carolina and Alabama to cut us off, and we're going to have a major problem."¹

Correction Secretary Aaron Johnson, urging the legislature to float bonds for prison construction, had this to say on his media line in December 1990, about a month after voters approved the bonds: "The people of North Carolina have given the General Assembly a

who cares?"

The Department of Transportation media line also covered the debut of the train, but said nothing about the protesters. "The main story was the [train] line, not the protesters," Jones says. "It's up to us to determine what we think would reflect best on the Department of Transportation, and that would be what we put on the [media] line."

That attitude has led some news executives in North Carolina to ban the use of media lines in their newsrooms. "It turns into cheerleading," says Bob Costner, the director of the four-person news staff at WSJS/WTQR Radio in Winston-Salem. "When you use a tape line like that, the agencies give you what they want you to hear. You relinquish your editorial control, and the First Amendment is thrown out the window." Rather than use media lines, WSJS/WTQR tries to reach state officials for interviews via telephone or obtains reports of Raleigh news events from radio stations which have covered them in person.

Some public information officers at state agencies question the value of media lines as well. "We'd rather have a real human being talk to a reporter who calls up," says Elliott Warnock, director of communications for Secretary of State Rufus Edmisten. "I don't ever remember his [Edmisten's] turning down a request for an interview."

mandate to act. The failure to act would undermine the state's legal defense against a federal takeover of our prison system. A failure to act would ignore the express will of a majority of those who voted on November 6."²

A reporter who called one of these media lines could edit these remarks, add some context to set the scene, and quickly have a story ready for broadcast. The reporter could also make a few extra phone calls to get the other side of the story, but that would take a lot longer.

Of course not every item that gets placed on a media line by a government official is worthy of a follow-up phone call. Take this tidbit from Jake Alexander, deputy secretary of Transportation, offered in December 1990 when awards were announced for outstanding roadside wildflower projects: "The Department of Transportation is pleased to honor the people

"The use of handout tape, except in very rare instances, is journalistic prostitution."

—F. GIFFORD

IN TAPE: A RADIO NEWS HANDBOOK

Don Folmer, public affairs director at the Department of Environment, Health, and Natural Resources, says his boss, EHNR Secretary Bill Cobey, also prefers to handle questions from the media in one-on-one interviews, rather than issuing prerecorded statements. "If the media want to talk to him, he will return phone calls or make himself available," Follmer says.

Governor Martin's office does not operate a conventional media line, but instead uses a system of distributing a broad choice of sound bites from the governor's weekly news conference. Each news conference is recorded in its entirety, says Martin press assistant Jeff Merritt. Afterwards, a reporter can learn from the wire service which topics the governor discussed and can call Martin's press office to receive sound bites on any topic the reporter chooses.⁴

who have worked so hard to make the wildflower program a success," says Alexander. "They've done an outstanding job in maintaining flower beds along the highways of our state. The wildflower program is an excellent example of how the department is working for a healthy and more beautiful environment. This program has received many letters in support and thanks for our beautification efforts."³

Thorny issue it's not, but then sometimes things are just rosy, even in state government.

—Mike McLaughlin

FOOTNOTES

¹Excerpted from Lt. Gov. Jim Gardner's media line, Dec. 13, 1990.

²Excerpted from the Department of Correction media line, Dec. 14, 1990.

³Excerpted from the Department of Transportation media line, Dec. 11, 1990.

For instance, after a November 1990 news conference, the press office received several calls from reporters requesting sound bites of Martin's comments on the state budget shortfall, according to Merritt. But some reporters from areas being considered for the state's proposed hazardous waste facility asked for sound bites on that subject instead.

Merritt says because the governor's system is more flexible than a conventional media line, reporters perceive it as more objective. "If they ask for something, we'll feed out anything, whether it's good, bad, or whatever," Merritt says. On some occasions, Merritt says he has played the tape of the entire news conference to reporters who hadn't attended in person.

A respected radio news textbook warns journalists against using media lines or other sources of handout sound bites, such as tapes that are mailed to radio stations from government officials, corporations, or organizations. "Though this stuff may be an excerpt from a public speech, it's still the product of PR judgment, rather than news judgment, on what's important," writes F. Gifford, in *Tape: A Radio News Handbook*.⁵ "And you can bet you won't be fed the part of the speech where the politician is booed or where he makes a fool of himself," adds Gifford. "The use of handout tape, except in very rare instances, is journalistic prostitution."

Gifford concedes, though, that for some radio stations, a sound bite on a worthwhile story is difficult to decline. At stations with only one or two people in the news department, reporters often have little time to do long interviews with newsmakers. It takes only a few minutes to turn a sound bite from a media line into a finished news story that's ready for broadcast. In comparison, it may take hours for a reporter to research a subject, call a state official, wait for the call to be returned, conduct an interview, edit the tape, and write the story.

Use of a media line by a small radio station is in some ways the equivalent of a small newspaper printing a state government news release verbatim. It's a time saver for news organizations with small staffs and limited budgets. Even at large news organizations like *The Charlotte Observer*, the demands of covering the day's events sometimes exceed the number of reporters available, and writers are forced to try to cover events by telephone. "That's unfortunately sometimes the limits of the business," says Kelley. "You just can't be everywhere at once."

Still, journalists may do a disservice to their audience if they rely on a government-run media line as their sole source for a news story. Important information may be omitted, and there is great potential for abuse by unscrupulous government officials. The result could be a misleading or wildly inaccurate account of a news event, relayed by perhaps dozens of radio stations and newspapers statewide. Follow-up phone calls are a minimal requirement to ensure accuracy, thoroughness, and fairness.

North Carolina journalists also would be well advised to follow Gifford's suggestion that quotes obtained from a media line be identified on the air or in print as originating "from a prepared statement." That may signal to the audience that the reporter did not interview the official. Reporters also should carefully analyze media line quotes to detect attempts to distort the news and should advise the public if a state official uses a media line as a way to avoid interviews on a controversial subject.

Finally, news organization executives have a responsibility to assure that their reporters use media lines only as a last resort and don't rely on them as a short-cut to good journalism. Indeed, some of those executives might find their reporters are forced to use media lines because their news departments are too small to cover stories in the traditional manner. In those cases, executives may want to ask themselves whether the money saved by understaffing their news departments is worth the consequences of allowing the government some editorial control of a supposedly free press. ☐

FOOTNOTES

¹Senate Bill 1 of the General Assembly's 1990 session authorized the Nov. 6, 1990, prison bond referendum, which passed by a vote of 690,110 (50.02 percent) to 689,528 (49.98 percent).

²For more on cutbacks in radio newsrooms, see Jack Betts, "Radio Journalism in North Carolina: Listening for Less News," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (June 1987), pp. 44-46.

³WPTF Radio News, May 11, 1990.

⁴According to Merritt, the governor's press assistants sometimes place calls to reporters after a news conference, rather than waiting for them to call. He says this is more frequently done in the summer months, when interns are employed to help with the workload. Reporters are still given a choice of topics for their sound bites, Merritt says, even if the governor's office places the call. The press office also plans to distribute for weekly broadcast a taped, two- to three-minute radio address by the governor.

⁵F. Gifford, *Tape: A Radio News Handbook*, Third Edition (Englewood, Col.: Morton Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 140-142.