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—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 newsworthy 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.