



The Capital Press Corps: When Being There Isn't Enough

by Jack Betts

With this article, North Carolina Insight launches its newest regular feature, which will examine the North Carolina news media and how they go about covering state government and public policy issues. The column will describe the process of how the press covers state government; evaluate its performance; and seek to enhance and improve the coverage of the various news media. This initial column examines changes in the last decade in the way the press has covered the N.C. General Assembly.

The wheels of change grind exceedingly fine in Raleigh, and so it is with the Capital Press Corps—an unstructured, free-form group of reporters and video technicians who cover state government in general and the Governor's Office and the General Assembly in particular. Tradition among reporters is held dear, and certain rituals are observed without fail each year in the press corps: annual end of session parties to which certain legislators are invited; the writing of bogus bills twitting certain members; and the election of a new press corps president and passage of a crudely fashioned wooden gavel as a symbol of the office. The gavel is really a sycamore mallet with the bark left on, a fitting reminder that the president has only two duties: saying "Thank you, Governor" at the end of gubernatorial press conferences, and organizing the annual end-of-session press party. That's about it.

Beyond that, the press corps covers the news pretty much as it always has, usually complying with Hundley's Rules. These rules constitute the advice dispensed by then-WPTF Radio reporter Keith Hundley (now Public Affairs Manager and a lobbyist for Weyerhaeuser Company) in the 1960s to novice reporters. Hundley's Rules of Raleigh

Reportage, then as now, hold: "(1) Don't fall down; (2) Don't get sick; and (3) Don't ever look like you don't know what you are doing." Almost all reporters, after the first week or so among the Honorables in Raleigh, manage to obey at least two out of three of these rules consistently, and with the passage of time, comply with all three.

But while the press corps itself performs more or less in the same fashion year in and year out, the makeup of the press corps as a body (press corpus?) has undergone two dramatic changes in recent years: The press corps as a whole is more inexperienced in covering state government than it used to be, and there aren't as many television reporters covering state government as there used to be. Both of these developments affect the way that newspaper readers and television watchers get their news about public policy issues and what their government is doing in Raleigh.

The Press Corps: Younger, More Inexperienced

Time was when the Capital Press Corps in Raleigh was a collection of middle-aged, experienced reporters who were likely to hold the same job for 25 years or more. The last of these, the venerable Arthur Johnsey of the Greensboro Daily News, retired in the early 1970s, and the press corps then went through a long period when

Jack Betts is Associate Editor of North Carolina Insight, and has been a Washington correspondent and Raleigh Bureau Chief for the Greensboro News & Record. He is a former president of the Capital Press Corps, and appears as a regular panelist on UNC Television's "North Carolina This Week" program.

reporters were relatively young (in their 20s and early 30s) and, thanks to the emphasis on Water-gate-style investigative reporting, more suspicious of government than their elders had been. By the latter part of the 1970s, this group, though still fairly young, had several sessions of legislative and state government coverage under its collective belt and was producing generally thorough coverage of state government in the papers and on radio and television newscasts.

During the 1979 and 1981 sessions of the General Assembly, competition for stories among the members of the press corps was keen. All the major state newspapers—those in Raleigh, Charlotte, Greensboro, and Winston-Salem—had at least two reporters, and sometimes more, assigned to the legislature, and several other daily papers—in Durham, Asheville, and Fayetteville—had at least one reporter assigned full-time to the legislature. So did television stations in Charlotte, Winston-Salem, Greensboro, Durham, and Raleigh. In addition, television stations in Asheville, High Point, Washington, and Greenville also had “stringers”—part-time correspondents who worked regularly covering the legislature and who could file daily stories for the 6 o’clock and 11 o’clock news.

But in 1982 and 1983, the most experienced of these reporters left Raleigh for other jobs or other assignments. Some, like Chief Capital Correspondent A. L. May of the *The News & Observer*, Dennis Whittington of the *Winston-Salem Journal*, and William A. Welch of the Associated Press, were promoted to their respective Washington bureaus. One, Stephen Kelly of *The Charlotte Observer*, even joined the Foreign Service.

By 1985, a relatively new cadre of statehouse reporters was assembled in Raleigh. There were some veterans, to be sure: Paul T. O’Connor of the N.C. Association of Afternoon Dailies, Rob Christensen of *The News & Observer*, back from a tour in the Washington Bureau, Art Eisenstadt of the *Winston-Salem Journal*, and Chuck Alston of the *Greensboro News & Record*, to name a few, but there were more new faces than there had been for a while. The wire services, the smaller newspapers (and some of the big ones, too), and the broadcast media had relatively inexperienced reporters covering the legislature.¹

There is no comprehensive roster of the Capital Press Corps over the years, but an examination of the list of regular statehouse reporters, printed every two years in the House and Senate rule books, makes the point. In 1977, 1979, and 1981, about two-thirds of the reporters (newspaper,

radio, and television) had covered at least one previous session, and thus were experienced enough to know their way around. But by 1985, there were so many new faces that *fewer than half* the reporters had covered a previous session of the General Assembly.

Experience is not the sole factor in determining whether one is a competent reporter, but inexperience can lead to the sort of gaffe that appeared in one newspaper. In a story by one of the inexperienced reporters on efforts by legislators to repeal the constitutional amendment allowing governors to succeed themselves,² the newspaper reported that the amendment had been supported in 1977 by both Gov. James B. Hunt Jr. and Lt. Gov. James C. Green. In fact, Green had strongly opposed succession because it would allow Hunt to run again, thus delaying Green’s own bid for the governorship. Green tried unsuccessfully to fight Hunt behind the scenes on succession. The bitter squabble was to contaminate relations between Hunt and Green for the next seven and a half years while both were in office, and continues between followers of the two.

However, those types of factual *faux pas* were tempered by an aggressive attitude that led, late in the session, to generally excellent coverage of two major abuses—the proliferation of special provisions in budget bills,³ and the disgorgement of pork barrel funds for every conceivable use that legislators could conjure. When stories appeared day after day reporting new horrors—such as substantive changes in laws adopted without debate through special provisions hidden in budget bills, and state tax funds going to private groups with no evident public purpose, Lt. Gov. Robert B. Jordan III was moved to appoint an *ad hoc* committee to come up with suggestions for improving the legislative process.

Unfortunately, the lessons of 1985 didn’t stick. When the Senate revised its own rules⁴ on pork barrel funds and special provisions at the start of the 1986 short session, reporters were too busy following other issues—including the insurance standoff and proposals to raise gas taxes to fund highway programs—to research and report on the latest abuses of the budget process, especially special provisions. Even a cursory examination of the 1986 budget bill, for example, would turn up scores of special provisions that should have been debated in normal legislative channels. So the abuses reporters turned up in the 1985 session went mostly unreported in 1986, at least partly because there simply weren’t enough reporters to go around.

Where Have All The TVs Gone?

The other major trend in Capital Press Corps coverage has been the apparent loss of interest in public policy issues by commercial television stations. Even up through the 1981 session of the General Assembly, at least nine of North Carolina's major television stations⁵ either had full-time bureaus operating year-round in Raleigh, or they assigned reporters full-time to cover the legislature while it was in session. In this way, television newscast viewers in Charlotte, Asheville, Winston-Salem, High Point, Greensboro, Durham, Raleigh, Washington, and Greenville saw regular reports of what was happening in Raleigh, and in particular saw how legislators in those areas voted on major bills and what they were up to in the capital city.

In the 1985 and 1986 sessions, however, commercial television nearly abandoned the General Assembly and Raleigh for all but the barest schedule of events. Two notable exceptions were WRAL in Raleigh, which assigned reporters in 1985 and 1986 fairly regularly to cover major events at the legislature, and WBTV in Charlotte, which still assigns a reporter regularly to daily or near-daily coverage in the General Assembly. WRAL's Tim Kent (who covered the 1986 session) and WBTV's Graham Wilson (a veteran legislative reporter) are well-regarded newsmen who know how to handle any story the legislature can throw at them. But the remainder of the state's major TV stations no longer maintain Raleigh bureaus or assign reporters full-time to Raleigh during legislative sessions, and their reporters rarely are equipped with the knowledge and background of public policy issues and their legislative nuances. In other words, the regular corps of television reporters has dropped enormously, from at least nine in previous sessions to only two regulars in the 1986 short session. "The commitment of the broadcast media to covering state government just isn't there anymore," notes one former television reporter who left the business for another job at the beginning of the 1985 session.

Television stations do, of course, send reporters on occasion to Raleigh for major events, such as the opening day of the session, a major speech by the governor, a weekly press conference, or a crucial vote on the floor of the House or Senate. And some stations swap news reports (through the Carolina News Network, for example) with Raleigh-area stations to pick up a story on what transpired in the General Assembly that day. But such spotty coverage can be relatively superficial,

and may not indicate exactly what is happening in Raleigh and who's behind it. Thus, even the best reporter who visits the legislature perhaps one or two days a week cannot possibly keep up with what is going on, and as a result can provide viewers with little more than a headline service.

This is not to say that good television coverage of the General Assembly does not exist. In fact, the UNC Center for Public Television, through its four-times-a-week "Legislative Report" program, provides first-rate television coverage of the General Assembly—and most of the state's television viewers can pick up the program. The public television station, which is funded partly by state taxpayers, commits major resources to government coverage, unlike the state's commercial stations. UNC-TV employs experienced reporters, producers, and technicians, and posts them full-time at the legislative building to produce four half-hour programs each week. These reports, again unlike commercial television news programs, are generally lengthy and seek to report not only what is happening, but also why, who's behind it, and what its effects may be. Still, even UNC-TV cannot cover everything in the four programs it airs each week. ("Legislative Report" goes off the air following legislative sessions, and another public affairs program, "Stateline", airs once a week from October until the start of the next legislative session.) What makes the UNC-TV coverage stand out is the experience of its top reporters, Ted Harrison (who has covered the assembly since the mid-1960s), Audrey Kates Bailey, and Marc Finlayson. No other news organization can boast of assigning that much experience to cover the legislature.

The reluctance of commercial television stations to commit full-time resources to covering the N.C. General Assembly is not an isolated case. Thanks to advances in video technology, television stations across the country have found it possible to send their own reporters for spot coverage of Washington, D.C., the state capital, and other, more far-flung places, without going to the expense of posting a reporter in one place all the time. Now, nearly any local station can dispatch a reporter and video technician to the capital, tape a couple of quick stories, beam them back (with a live report from Raleigh, yet) and still be back home to cover a five-car fatal on the bypass and the local school board meeting. That does allow a station's news operation to stretch its resources.

Yet what new technology allows a station to do in getting a quick report from Raleigh still may leave viewers in the dark and wondering what

really goes on in Raleigh. Those viewers may be reaching for the morning paper to find out—and having to read it in stories filed by inexperienced reporters. ☐☐☐

FOOTNOTES

¹For a fuller discussion of the problems of covering state government with small bureaus, see "Improving News Coverage," *State Legislatures* magazine, March 1985, pps. 29-31.

²Article III, Section 3, The Constitution of North Carolina.

³For more on this issue, see *Special Provisions in Budget Bills: A Pandora's Box for North Carolina's Citizens* by Ran Coble, N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, June 1986.

⁴Senate Resolution 861, "To Amend the Permanent Rules of the Senate," adopted June 11, 1986.

⁵Stations which had full-time reporters or stringers in Raleigh included WBTV in Charlotte, WLOS in Asheville, WXII in Winston-Salem, WGHP in High Point, WFMY in Greensboro, WTVD in Durham, WRAL in Raleigh, WNCT in Greenville, and WITN in Washington.

IN THE LEGISLATURE

— continued from page 46

engaged in a marathon redistricting battle. Forced by the courts and the U.S. Justice Department to end the dilution of black voting strength, and, in some cases to carve out predominantly black districts, the 1981 assembly set the stage for 1982 elections in which 12 blacks won seats. By 1985, 16 blacks were in the legislature—three in the Senate, 13 in the House.

Rep. H. M. "Mickey" Michaux (D-Durham), a black, says redistricting made the big difference, and adds that black leaders in the mid-70s were also partly to blame for the paucity of black legislators at that time. Much black political effort went into the election of a Democratic president in 1976 and towards the attainment of goals like affirmative action through the executive branch of government, he says.

Michaux, the leader of a legislative movement to do away with primary runoffs,² says even the attainment of that goal will not significantly boost black numbers in the assembly. Any increase of blacks beyond the current plateau of 16 seats, or 9 percent of total representation, depends on three factors. "We need greater black voter participation, more acceptance of black candidates by whites, and the diminution of race as an issue," Michaux says. As an indication that blacks are gaining white acceptance and that race is diminishing as an issue, Michaux points to the election of Harvey Gantt as a two-term mayor of Charlotte and the nomination of William Freeman as a Democratic House candidate from rural, and very conservative, southern Wake County. Both Gantt and Freeman are black.

A Partisan Roller-Coaster

The partisan make-up of the General Assembly remains on a roller-coaster. Generally, Republicans gain seats in presidential election years, and they lose them two years later. If the Jimmy Carter election of 1976 is put aside, that pattern holds true for every election since 1970. Republicans had a nadir of 10 legislative victories in 1974 (when 40 GOP seats were lost in the post-Watergate election) and zeniths of 50 seats in both 1972 and 1984. In recent years, the Republican lows have been 20 and 24 seats in the non-presidential election years of 1978 and 1982.

But Republicans are hoping they won't drop back again in the 1986 election. Sen. Donald Kincaid (R-Caldwell), who was the lone Republican in the 1975 Senate, does not expect the GOP to hold all 50 seats it won in 1984, but says that party efforts at candidate recruitment, and the popularity of Republican Gov. James G. Martin, should help the party to one of its best showings in a non-presidential election this fall.

As legislators look ahead 15 years, they wonder about the makeup of future General Assemblies. Will there be continued change, through a greater diversity of occupations, gender, race, and political parties? Or will the elements of economics and aging dominate to the extent that the General Assembly of 2001 might be comprised mostly, or even solely, of the wealthy and the elderly? ☐☐☐

FOOTNOTE

¹For more on this point, see "Survey: Lawmakers Wealthier, Whiter Than Constituents," by Tim Funk, *The Charlotte Observer*, March 2, 1985.

²See "The Runoff Primary—A Path to Victory," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 6, No. 1, June 1983, p. 18.