A STUDY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT NEWS SOURCES: METHODS AND PROBLEMS OF PUBLICATION

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A STUDY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT NEWS SOURCES:

METHODS AND PROBLEMS OF PUBLICATION

By

Elmer E. White

AN ABSTRACT

Submitted to the College of Communication Arts
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APPROVED: Fred L. Shuert

Elmer E. White

The object of this study is to organize information regarding the collection and publication of news from local government news sources.

This includes the identification and potential of such sources; problems of securing facts, dealing with officials, laws and regulations; the responsibility of the reporter and the newspaper.

The paper first establishes the need and value of local government news coverage, then deals with the many ways it is possible to collect such news. Local government is divided into three basic categories for study: municipal, county and schools. Individual offices in each division are discussed. The importance of each office as well as the possible problems reporters can expect to face in securing news therefrom is also discussed.

Attention is directed to the continuing battle of all news media involving the right of the people in any community to know facts of its government's operation. Attention is also directed to some of the problems in presenting such facts in a form sufficiently palatable to maintain a reader's interest.

Ethical and social responsibilities of a newspaper are discussed, and an attempt is made to suggest methods of dealing with them.

It is a curious fact that relatively little attention is paid to this general subject in journalism text books or publications of the profession. Still, there is wide agreement that such local news coverage is of great importance to a community.

Academic material for this study came from what could be found in journalistic trade publications and texts as well as from the field of political science. A close study of local government news stories appearing in Michigan newspapers during 1958 was undertaken by the Michigan Press Service clipping bureau. Personal experience plus that of others actually performing reporting duties played an important part in providing material which appears in this paper.

Basic conclusions include the following:

There is an increasing need for adequate news coverage of local government, and the task of supplying such is becoming increasingly more difficult.

The reporting of local government news involves automatically the responsibility of doing so accurately and well.

The task can be accomplished best only after considerable effort and thought is devoted to the most productive ways a reporter can deal with these sources. Reporting techniques can be developed which will be very productive.

The news sources must be continually analyzed by the reporter to allow for tendencies to withhold information unfavorable to the official.

It can be further concluded that information contained in this study is of value to any young or inexperienced reporter assigned to cover local government. This provides background and specific data to help him function more effectively.

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Acknowledgement is gratefully noted here for the encouragement and understanding shown by Dr. Fred S. Siebert during the compilation of material which appears in this study. Without his counsel and aid this task would have been infinitely more difficult.

And gratitude is expressed for the information supplied promptly, cheerfully and completely by readers in the newspaper clipping bureau of Michigan Press Service, Inc. Material supplied by them was of great value in dealing with this study.

I further wish to express thanks to Mrs. Richard Bernard, my secretary, who typed all but the first eight pages of this thesis with her right forefinger in a cast. It is obvious that smashing one's finger in a car door makes more difficult the task of typing a work such as this.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Common and Unique Function of Newspapers.

Amid arguments that newspapers have lost or are losing their status as opinion molders, their power as political forces, their importance as news disseminating sources; amid claims that newspapers are bigger and better than ever, their features more appealing, their appearance more enchanting; amid these charges and many others, at least one point goes unchallenged:

Newspapers have an obligation to print news.

The volume of news, the type of news, the manner in which news is presented varies greatly from newspaper to newspaper, but the one thing all newspapers have in common is a local community. And the same community which makes up the readership makes the news.

Also inherent in the relationship of a newspaper to its community is the fact that usually the local newspaper has an exclusive field in presenting local news. In most instances, especially the smaller communities, residents in a community have virtually no other source for news of local government activities.

This same situation places a responsibility on the newspaper to dig out the facts and report them for the citizenry.

Some editors anxiously shoulder this responsibility. This is evidenced by mottoes or slogans which appear on the publication's flags. "All the news that's fit to print," or "The Newspaper Which Cares More About Homeville Than Anywhere Else In The World."

International, national and state news can be obtained elsewhere, but in the majority of the communities it is the local newspaper which must carry news of local government if such is to be disseminated.

The degree to which different newspapers cover local news varies. Anyone can establish this fact by a simple comparison of several publications. There is variation in scope or breadth of coverage; and there is variation in depth or detail of coverage.

Actually, "depth" reporting requires more than the simple recording of fact. It requires searching, thinking, analyzing. Editorializing which might develop from this reportorial activity can require courage, intelligence and fortitude.

This paper is not concerned with "depth" reporting. This is not to infer that "depth" reporting is not desirable but to eliminate the "depth" factor and better define the paper's subject.

The study will deal with the wealth of information which is available to editors of newspapers----available from the everyday activities of the governmental units in their own localities.

The Source in Your Own Backyard.

"Do you have any ideas for a story?" is a question common to a newspaper office. One reason the question is asked might be that newspaper personnel, like others in other fields, become rutted in their

activities. They simply fail to comprehend the many good news stories about local government, perhaps because no one printed something like it last week, last month or last year.

It is hoped that information presented here can serve to stimulate editors and reporters to make full use of local government offices as news sources to the end that the public will be better served with the information and the newspaper better served for printing the story.

CHAPTER II

THE NEED FOR THE PRESS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES

The Mission Defined.

> The press is a forum, one might even say a pulpit, from which truth enters the community, informs the public and inspires citizens to action. In its role it cannot merely take the part of one interest as against others; it cannot cater to the base and to the curious; it cannot suppress and distort; it cannot exaggerate and mislead.
>
> If it performs its function badly, the whole process of public education is infiltrated with poison at its source, and the building of good society becomes very nearly impossible. But, if, on the other hand, it assumes commanding leadership, ready to take command in good causes, then it revitalizes and, if necessary, reforms the men and the institutions in the community in which it works. (5)

The importance of the press, eloquently stated by Archbishop Richard J. Cushing at the 1957 annual Mass for the Press in Boston, defines the value of a well functioning press. Each newspaper must meet in its own community and in its own way the challenge inherent in attempting to provide news to its readers.

The Value of Knowledge.

In the United States the individual citizen with his vote plays an important part in reaching decisions which affect society in many ways. A principal means of accumulating facts upon which to base his voting decision is the local newspaper.

If, for example, a number of auto accidents occur at a certain intersection, an individual is more apt to support a proposition to install street lights there than if he has no such knowledge.

In controversial matters the newspaper becomes the forum where voters search for material to help them reach their decisions.

Suffice it to say, that without newspapers with their reporting of every day events on the local government scene, the citizen would be deprived of an excellent source of information. This lack would make it infinitely more difficult for him to reach wise decisions regarding local governmental affairs.

A newspaper which does a capable job reporting its governmental affairs to the public can be a sparkling asset to the community. Complete and accurate information in the hands of the citizens can provide the basis for improvement within the community.

The newspaper which reports such affairs fully and well can expect to become a valued institution within the community it serves, for the intelligence it imparts fills a need felt by every sincere citizen who wishes to react wisely to problems of the day.

Present Press Coverage.

First thing apparent in an examination of newspapers printed in Michigan is the tremendous latitude in coverage of local government news. This should come as no surprise. All newspapers carry some news of local governmental affairs, but they vary greatly. Some editors discuss and take stands on current issues in their editorials or their personal columns; others are careful not to discuss such issues.

In his study of weekly newspapers in the Chicago area, Morris Janowitz found that

> The community press is generally perceived as an extension of the reader's personal and social contacts because of its emphasis on news about voluntary associations and local social and personal news.
>
> The community press is not generally perceived as political or partisan but rather as an agent of community welfare and progress (10).

It is understandable that newspapers published in areas which are relatively small parts of larger areas would have little to do with local government problems. But what about newspapers which serve an entire community, especially an entire small community?

Charles T. Duncan, after his research into manners in which the weekly press covers local government news (7), concluded that fewer than half give "on the spot" coverage to public sessions of the three key units of government (municipal, county and school) and that the local press is not doing its job. "It is not living up to the obligations of its self assumed and widely proclaimed 'grass roots' role," he stated.

George Hough, who reported a thorough study of 11 Michigan weeklies (9), found that newspapers in his sample devoted 39% of their space to non-commercial material. Of this, an average of 10.7% was used to report government news, the publications ranging from 6.3% to 19.7%. In his opinion the larger weeklies did a more capable job of reporting. He also found that dramatic events of local government, like crimes, accidents and fires, received much more attention than more significant affairs of cities, school districts and counties.

Professional newspaper readers in the clipping bureau of the Michigan Press Service, Inc., kept track of all newspaper articles pertaining to local governmental activities appearing in Michigan daily and weekly newspapers during the week beginning October 25, 1958. During this seven day period Michigan's 56 dailies printed 251 such articles. Only 67 such stories appeared in the state's 309 weekly publications.

It appears, then, that there is an opportunity for the press to provide much better coverage than it provides at present.

One source of surprise concerning local government coverage involves the lack of attention the journalistic world appears to give to the subject.

A search of trade and professional publications turns up relatively little indication that much concern is devoted to this area. Editor and Publisher magazine, for example, contains very little. Journalism Quarterly, designed for the journalism educator, offers only a few articles during the last ten years.

Political science publications devote no more attention than do journalism sources.

There is, however, indication that educators have become more concerned with press coverage for schools recently, for numerous handbooks were published on the subject.

Another booklet designed to help local officials work with newspapers and other media was published by University of Michigan's Bureau

of Government in 1956, but this was not directed at members of the press (12). Nonetheless, the publication has much information valuable to an editor or a reporter who wishes to better understand and more effectively deal with local government news.

One who sets great store in the coverage of local government activities can only conclude that this is an area which has been taken so much for granted that very little attention has been paid to the subject.

It also seems that journalism educators give less attention to local government news than they could. Perhaps they assume the student can be expected to learn about such things in political science courses.

Apparently, the professional and trade journals practically ignore the field. Somehow the subject is not often mentioned in their columns.

And apparently, there is much less newspaper space devoted to information about local government than could be the case. If newspapers were alert to the many possible stories they are missing, certainly more would be in print.

One can only conclude that there is great potential for improvement in reporting news of local government to members in the community. And perhaps one can concede too that the publication of such articles will better serve the reader, the community and the newspaper itself.

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CHAPTER III

COLLECTING NEWS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES

Coping With the Task.

Covering local government can be done in any of several ways. As might be expected, the practice varies a great deal from publication to publication. The newspaper's method will be determined according to the policy set by the publisher, limits of staff and demands of the readers.

In most cases the final decision rests in the hands of the editor. If he is interested in supplying a full measure of local government news and staffed to do so, there will be fewer problems. It is up to the editor to direct policy for selecting the news diet of the reader. In general, he responds to the wishes of his subscribers. If a sufficient number of readers let him know they expect full coverage, the newspaper is more likely to provide it than otherwise.

In some instances, especially with small newspapers, an editor may want to supply news to readers who want to receive it, but the economic factor prevents him from doing so. Where, as is the case with numerous weeklies, the publisher doubles as editor, reporter and printer, he is simply unable to attend many meetings to collect first hand the important news which might be developing.

But a newspaper's job is to collect and print as much important news as possible, so the publisher must decide what is to be done about news of this category; how much of it is to appear; how it is to be collected.

In so doing he has several ways to get the job done. He can choose any one or combination of methods to best fit his circumstances.

A Man on the Beat.

A common and most exciting method of collecting news, if we are to believe novel, movie and stage, is to assign a reporter to visit certain offices each day or week. The assumption is that news from each office will be collected and written for the reader; that the reader will know everything that is going on.

The beat assignment can be a most effective practice. This is, no doubt, the reason it is used by most large newspapers covering large municipalities. It has advantages of organization: everyone knows who is covering each office. A reporter can accumulate a background in specific subjects, a sense of specialized if "immediate history," which can help him interpret events to his readers. He can become familiar with the offices he covers and the people in them.

But there are some inherent weaknesses in the beat system, and it is well for the reporter to be careful of certain pitfalls.

One such peril involves routine. Visits can become so much a matter of habit that good stories are missed by the reporter. The reporter can come to depend on people in the office he is covering to

possess a "nose for news" which simply does not exist. Or, should he depend too much and too often on key people, it is also possible he will miss a story they prefer to withhold from him. Often this is exactly the type story which most needs to be written.

A second consideration is size of the beat. If a reporter has too many points to check, the danger increases he will not be in the right place at the right time.

A capable reporter, however, can overcome without great difficulty these types of obstacles and do a creditable job. If he is alert and competent, he can deal with these situations. If he be of lower caliber, he can cover the beat, make many motions and still not report facts which should appear in print.

Beats often include meetings of boards, commissions, councils and similar bodies. Frequently there are many such meetings; sometimes they are tediously long; usually they take place at night.

Reporters who cover such meetings are paid on an overtime basis in larger cities. In other instances these meetings are considered "part of the job" and are covered on the reporter's time. A weekly publisher might have to attend several of these meetings each week in addition to his usual duties during the day.

A newspaper which expects to do a complete job for its community has no choice. It must be represented at a high percentage of such meetings if it is to collect facts and "atmosphere" to report objectively and in an authoritative manner the action of its local government bodies.

All in all, the "man on the beat" is probably the best method of collecting news. The editor's job is to keep a good reporter moving to the place where news is developing and to keep him searching for "all the news that's fit to print."

Dial a Number.

A time saving device often utilized, particularly by smaller newspapers, involves the use of the telephone. Essentially, this amounts to covering a beat without leaving the newspaper office. The same people can be contacted at regular intervals on the telephone as in person.

There are some advantages. The first, already mentioned, is the saving of time. In some instances a reporter can make a contact more readily with a key person than when he calls in person. The contact and "interview" take less time over the telephone than in person.

The disadvantages are worth considering. Lack of the reporter's presence in the office increases the chance for inaccuracy; the shading of a news angle by someone who wishes to do so; the chance of missing completely a story which might be worthwhile.

It is virtually impossible to "nose around" in search of a news angle by use of the telephone. In fact, the reporter gives up some of his strategic position when he talks on the telephone rather than face to face with his news source, for he loses the chance to observe reactions of the person to whom he is talking. Such reactions often suggest good news stories.

Reporters sometimes check with a school superintendent, for example, about what took place at a school board meeting. Such a practice is likely to secure some news about the meeting. It is also likely that the information he secures will be colored either consciously or subconsciously by the superintendent.

Telephone calls are better than no effort to collect news, but the practice is a substantial compromise with the more effective personal contact method.

Stringing Alongwith Correspondents.

The vast number of meetings, offices and people to be dealt with if all local points are to be covered has already been mentioned. So has the cost of maintaining such coverage.

One means of dealing with these problems is for the editor to engage a part time correspondent to cover certain meetings, departments or offices. These people are often referred to as stringers.

The engaging of a correspondent simply means that the editor arranges with an individual to be present and to report what took place at a certain time. Such individuals are usually not considered employes of the newspaper, but independent contractors. They usually are not full time newspaper workers, but handle such responsibility in their spare time and in their own way.

If the publisher believes it to his business advantage to maintain the independent contractor relationship with the correspondent, he must be careful to observe certain practices.

He must pay the correspondent according to the material he submits, not at a set salary.

He must not assume "direct" control of the correspondent's efforts. Instead he must give only general instructions.

It is important for the correspondent to do his work at a point other than the newspaper office.

These points sometimes irritate newspaper publishers, but they constitute the criteria in state law which identifies an employe as contrasted with a contractor. If the points are not observed, the employer is likely to find himself cited by a state inspector for not carrying proper workman's compensation and unemployment compensation insurance.

The caliber of reporting depends, of course, on the correspondent. If he does not always get news, he can supply an editor important leads. His presence is evidence that the newspaper is interested. He serves a purpose.

Have a Handout.

A common practice in some cases is for an official or government office to supply written news releases which the reporter need only pick up and take to his office. These are known as "handouts."

Such a procedure has certain advantages. Its real value depends on how well the release is written, whether or not it contains all the facts and whether it covers the aspect of the news story which is of interest to the reader rather than benefit to the writer.

Some officials, especially in school systems or those in unusually difficult positions, are concerned lest the facts not be reported accurately.

Therefore they protect themselves by establishing a record which provides information the reporter needs. Sometimes a better news story will result if the reporter has all the facts prepared for him and in his hands.

The big danger about handouts, of course, is that a reporter who simply collects such releases and transports them to his editor surrenders his responsibility to collect news in return for the ease and convenience of picking up a prepared story.

He is a poor reporter who takes handouts at face value. One cannot expect an office holder under fire to write impartial, or completely accurate stories about the situation. On the contrary, handouts are usually written to contain what the official wants people to know rather than what the people ought to know.

Handouts can make a good starting point for an alert reporter. After reading the copy he should attempt to find answers to questions like these:

Is this the whole story?

Would other people concerned be able to add facts?

Are reasons given in the handout the real ones which motivated action?

How can I add more to improve this story?

What can be subtracted from this story without losing news value?

Can I improve lead or news angle to attract more readers?

Unless he can improve handouts from local officials, a reporter can legitimately ask himself whether he is a reporter or a messenger.

It can be argued that handouts are efficient.

This writer once covered a school system where the superintendent met reporters at each meeting of the board with mimeographed copies of minutes for the meeting which was about to take place!

Wording was always accurate and complete insofar as formal actions of the board were concerned. The meeting consisted of 10 minutes or so when the minutes were read and acted out. Board members were reluctant to discuss any school business with reporters, referring all inquiries to the superintendent. The latter would go into more detail when asked questions, but would seldom provide facts not in the minutes.

The superintendent, incidentally, argued long and hard that his method of supplying news of school board affairs was proper, complete and, most of all, efficient.

Suffice it to say, that reporters should consider handouts only as leads for news stories which can be greatly improved if time and effort are expended to that end. The reporter who does otherwise also performs a disservice to his readers and runs the risk that little imperfections which are connected with even the best handouts will become gross when it is urgently to the advantage of the person writing the release.

Thanks for the Tip.

Still another method of collecting local news is to encourage and even depend upon the news "tip."

A "tip" can be defined in this instance as a message from some person to the newspaper about some occurrence which is of general interest to the public.

The news tip, however, is fraught with danger for the newspaper. Basic reason for this is that the tipster seldom acts from motivation of benevolence. He is more likely to be motivated by a desire for some sort of personal gain. Perhaps this is only the enjoyment he might derive from seeing another person embarrassed. Perhaps he hopes for financial gain. Perhaps he is acting from spite.

Or maybe the tipster is hoping to win personal recognition as one who has done the newspaper a favor. If so, it is likely he will want to be paid off in one form or another.

Nonetheless, many good news stories can start from a tip. The duty of the reporter is to investigate and check out such news leads.

News tips can become so routine they can hardly be classified in this category. In Muskegon Heights, for example, the officer in charge of the police desk was instructed by the chief of police to phone the newspaper reporter immediately when anything unusual happened. Such messages usually consisted of a curt: "There's been a murder," or "There's a bad fire at Cedar and Elm streets."

Just the information that something has or is about to happen permits the newspaper to get an earlier start in collecting news than otherwise. Because time is usually of prime importance, tips can be very valuable. Because the person who provides the tip assumes no real responsibility, the reporter should handle each tip with great care.

The "Informal" News Source.

In all of his activities with local government the reporter should be ever alert for what can be considered "informal" news sources. These are people whose work or position permits them to gain knowledge of news importance but who have no official responsibility to divulge facts to the reporter. In fact, strict interpretation of their situation is more likely to demand that they do not divulge such information.

An official's secretary, for instance, might know as much or even more about a subject of interest to the reporter than does her superior. Depending on the people and situation, it might be possible to secure this information from her if the official is unavailable.

Telephone operators, office clerks, even janitors and barbers can be expected to pick up information from time to time. If these individuals can be encouraged to supply news leads, the reporter is that much less likely to miss news.

The informal news source need not be so insidious as it might sound. Its use is a device to help insure that no news is missed. Most information must be checked with official sources so its proper use does not include the printing of rumors and other inaccurate or unverified data.

A reporter is justified in using all legal means to accomplish his task. It is unrealistic to overlook informal news sources, and it might prove costly in the loss of valuable news stories.

"Training" the News Source.

In all methods of collecting information discussed there is one factor common in some degree: a reporter secures facts by talking with or dealing with another person.

This relationship may be routine and frequent or it may vary in its character. In all instances, however, it will be more rewarding if the reporter is able to secure all pertinent data promptly.

The reporter who can create a reputation for "not being fooled," for persisting for information until he gets it, for being fair with his sources, for dealing competently with facts in his stories, is going to do better than one who is not so respected. This sounds logical enough, but to create such a reputation is entirely another matter.

To do so requires those twin elements which seem common to so many successes: thought and energy.

A keen reporter must be truly observant. He must keep his eyes open for little indications that something unusual is going on. He must watch for facial expressions or other mannerisms which indicate an official is uneasy, for the root of this uneasiness might be a story of great interest to his newspaper.

The difference between an ordinary and an outstanding reporter is the ability to secure from the news source more and more important news. Reporters adopt various means to accomplish this. One will persist in questions, repeating, nagging, wearing down the source. Another will become belligerent in manner, bitter, disagreeable, menacing.

Whatever the method, if the reporter can successfully secure the facts he needs, he has his story.

In the relationship between the reporter and the source, be it the mayor, the fire chief or the school superintendent, he has the opportunity to dominate. If he does not dominate, it is likely the other person will. And if the reporter does not dominate the relationship, he will get less news than otherwise.

Reporters, therefore, have much to gain by consciously studying all sources and conditions where they collect information. If they take advantage of all factors, and if they deal wisely with news sources so that sources are more uncomfortable withholding facts than divulging facts, they will have most success.

A source who knows what facts a reporter needs, who feels free to give them, who is willing to give them is, of course, the best source possible.

It should be a reporter's calculated task to attempt to develop by all means possible all of his sources into the best possible sources.

There are two basic courses a reporter can follow in "training" his news sources. One is to impress the source with the fact that he (the reporter) is a good fellow, friendly, cooperative, willing to overlook some news in order to maintain harmony with the source.

The second, and more aggressive, is to impress the source that the basic reason for the reporter's presence is to collect facts, letting the chips fall where they may. If he finds the source withholding information embarrassing to him but which he secures elsewhere, he might go out of his way to see that the story gets fullest possible treatment in the newspaper.

The reaction from the official, while it might be heated at the moment, also tends to be more respectful in the future. Nor is the lesson likely to be lost to other officials who observe what is happening.

It seems to be that people in key positions are more worried about more of the same rough treatment just experienced than they are resentful of that already experienced. After all, when the story is printed the harm is done. The best official can hope for is that there will be no repetition.

Sources can be trained. And stern treatment tends to train them into better news sources than friendly treatment.

Who Gets It First?

In most communities the problem of competing newspapers develops in some degree at one time or another. In larger communities this problem is constant and further complicated by competing news media.

The small town may have its local weekly and be covered by a nearby larger weekly or daily newspaper. The small city daily may compete with reporters from larger dailies. The larger cities may have reporters from several local dailies and regional weeklies looking for news. In addition there are likely to be reporters from one or more radio and television stations.

The situation which includes reporters from more than one news disseminating agency is automatically more delicate for the government official. The situation becomes still more acute if the reporters possess the aggressive qualities already described as desirable from a newspaper standpoint.

An official dealing with a reporter from a local weekly and another from a nearby daily must reconcile himself to a certain amount of haggling by reporters or their editors, especially when there are unusual or important news stories.

The weekly comes out only once a week, and if the officials there believe it is entitled protection on news, they may be subject to pressure from other newspapers. The daily newspaper, on the other hand, does not take kindly to officials who release information too late in the day for publication but early enough so radio or television stations are first to present the story to the public.

Still another, but less common type of competition for news, is the battle between the morning and the afternoon daily.

There can be no blanket solution which will satisfy everyone in cases where reporters compete for news. But a continuous state of war need not exist where reporters quarrel about the time that each news story is released.

In most cases the public official can be expected to follow the line which provides him the least resistance. He may adopt certain policies which tend to relieve him of responsibility in the situation. For example, he may say that the local newspaper is entitled to most news first, simply because it is the local newspaper. He may set certain times when he will release news and have the fact generally understood by reporters.

The wise official is one who recognizes the factors involved in releasing a news story so that he can best keep from embarrassing the reporters with whom he is involved. For the most part, reporters understand that news cannot be released to suit everyone equally. They respect, even though they may complain loudly, intelligent and fair treatment at the hands of the official.

Thus far we have discussed timeliness from the standpoint of the breaking news story. Now let us consider the factor of time from the standpoint of the reporter. In the first situation the reporter has little control over whenthe news will break. In the second he can control the time a great deal.

There is nothing to prevent a reporter from digging out some stories by himself. Feature stories, for example, are not apt to be released by an official, but they are apt to be read by the newspaper subscriber.

This provides latitude for the "thinking, working" reporter. Such a person can locate his own stories, collect facts and write his copy without worry that competition will be doing likewise. Effective use of this latitude contrasts the more competent reporter with the others.

Collecting Thoughts on Collecting News.

One can recognize that all methods of collecting government news have certain common aspects. No matter how the information is gathered, facts pertaining to a unit's operation which are of interest to the public must be presented in a medium available to the public.

In all these instances, the medium, and therefore the reporter, has a responsibility. The obvious responsibility to the reader is to supply him with accurate, pertinent information palatably as possible.

There is also an important and direct responsibility to the source and subject of the news. Reporters who are careless, overanxious or lazy cannot expect to be treated with respect. The well meaning, but inexperienced reporter, although it is easier to forgive him his trespasses, is equally lacking in respect from the person who gives out the news.

When the reporter does not command this respect, the news source is not apt to be neutral in his attitude. He is more likely to fear the reporter.

When one considers that inaccurate reporting can reflect unfavorably upon an office or individual in government; can cause great amounts of work to correct; can cause voter decisions which are to the public detriment; can even ruin political or civil service careers, one can also understand why public officials consider incompetent or unfair reporters a genuine hazard to their livelihoods.

It might be observed that all too few reporters seem to understand the threat they constitute to public officials when they do not treat information secured from them adequately. A simple, "I'm sorry I made a mistake," may take care of the courtesy of the situation, but it often cannot rectify the damage done in a false report.

When reporters demand to be taken into the confidence of public officials, they should also ask themselves if they are worthy of that confidence. Since inexperienced, unqualified reporters can cause great personal and public damage, it is understandable that they should be feared.

Still another effect of poor reporting is that it provides a basis for all officials to withhold information from all reporters. The official who has suffered or can relate how someone similar has suffered as a result of poor reporting, feels he has sufficient cause to withhold valid information. A formidable and unnecessary barrier has therefore been created.

It is not unknown for officials to withhold for other and more personal reasons legitimate news items from very competent reporters. This, of course, is a different matter, and one which can be dealt with by the competent reporter.

Still another aspect common in all methods of covering government news sources is the tendency for the collection procedure to become routine or to take on an automatic characteristic. This tendency is inherent in this and many other tasks.

The best way to deal with the monotonous aspect of talking frequently to the same people about the same things is simply to work at doing it differently. Again, the measure of an accomplished reporter is the way in which he can overcome the drabness of routine and find information of interest to his readers when less skilled reporters seem unable to unearth stories of consequence.

No matter how the news is collected, there is always room for applied skill to result in a superior performance. Identify this quality as alertness, intelligence, craftsmanship or what one will, this is the factor which can be exercised to the end that the reporter can experience a personal, creative satisfaction in knowing he has done an outstanding piece of work.

CHAPTER IV

MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT IN THE NEWS

The Task to Be Done.

Regardless of the municipality, its size or make up, there is likely to be a number of characteristics which can be found in other municipalities.

All, for example, have boundaries. The boundary is usually legal, but sometimes exists by common agreement.

They all have population. And the needs of the people, though they may vary from one locality to another and are cared for according to law prescribed by state, county or by the municipality itself.

Among these needs are law enforcement, sanitation, water, education of children, recreation, preservation of records showing property ownership, vital statistics, care of the poor and protection from fire. Because money must be collected to provide for these needs, another need develops: a tax system.

From the most sparsely settled township, where the highest percentage of these needs are left to the individual, to the crowded cities, where there are offices for all the purposes mentioned here and more, there is a local, municipal government. This government functions, in theory at least, for the benefit of the people it serves.

It is not always easy to understand; its citizens are not always as interested as they might be, but the government unit is always there. And one of the responsibilities of the newspaper is to supply a steady stream of information about this municipality to the people there.

The City As a News Source.

It is impossible to compile a universally practical list of every city department, official and employe to be considered sources of newspaper stories. It is possible, however, to compile a list, imperfect as it might be, which can be of substantial aid when an editor seeks to report adequately to his readers the pertinent facts of their city government.

City government, it must be remembered, is dynamic. The office which can provide live news today, might be much less newsworthy tomorrow. As community needs develop, so should the community means of providing for them. A problem solved in one city may be a big news event in another because people there are facing a duplicating or similar circumstance.

Because city government deals with local people, there is an unusual opportunity to secure good readership with feature stories about various departments, personnel and services. Many a fact or impression introduced to a reader in a newspaper story can be responsible for the way he votes on a related subject at a subsequent election.

The following list of offices and sources is more elaborate than is found in most cities. But it can form a checklist of sorts for an editor who wishes to evaluate how much of his city's news he is covering or by a reporter who simply wants to enlarge the scope of his coverage.

A surprisingly accurate list can be relatively simply compiled by an editor by checking the telephone listings in the local directory or by checking the city's organizational table if it has one.

When reporting city affairs there are certain types of stories which can be written about nearly any department, office or individual. Rather than repeat these in each separate instance mentioned, they are listed below. For the most part, stories in these categories are considered feature stories rather than straight news. Nonetheless, a great deal of information can be passed palatably to the reader in a feature story. Since a principal need in a community is for its inhabitants to understand the functions of its government, it makes little difference if this knowledge is derived from news stories or feature stories.

News Hooks Good Anywhere.

A basic story on the function of the office or individual.

Descriptive stories of the office, its personnel, retirements, cost of operation, history, etc.

Comparative statistical reports related to previous years or time units.

Character study of the head of a department or other individual (oldest, youngest, etc.).

These news hooks, and no doubt others similar, can become the basis for many column inches of really readable copy. There is no limit to the treatment an ingenious editor can utilize. He might take various departments of the city, for example, and cover each one "through the eyes

of a child." Or a writer can treat each department in a different manner at different times, according to needs in the community and capacity of the newspaper.

More important than feature treatment, especially when controversial issues exist, are actual news stories. When the citizen becomes heatedly concerned, he wants facts as soon as possible; not features.

The newspaper's job is to provide these facts, and all newspapers worthy of the name must accept this responsibility. It is to be noted, however, that the reader who has had a steady diet of feature material about the city where he lives also has a superior background of facts which is likely to help him better understand the various points in any issue.

A Checklist of News Sources.

For sake of organization, news sources are divided generally into the following groups: administrative, departments, boards and commissions, miscellaneous. The best news source may bear no relation to the place it is listed. It is up to each editor or reporter to search and decide according to the individual situation which sources he will deal with at a particular time.

Mayor or Chief Executive. He is the official head of the city. He presides at council meetings, has his fingers in local politics. He is a logical man to see frequently.

Councilmen. These are the men who decide policy for operation of the city. They may act in harmony or discord, but singly they are often excellent sources of news. When there is disagreement, it is advisable to contact spokesmen from both sides.

City Manager. This man is generally responsible for the administration of city departments according to policies set by the council. He is the most obvious, and often the best single news source in the city.

Clerk. This official is in charge of many of the routines connected with the city's operation. He works with records and files; registration lists and elections. He also can be expected to have a fund of background knowledge valuable for interpretative news stories and can become an authority when specific facts are needed.

Assessor. Tax assessing is one city government function which touches everyone within city limits. Assessing is usually a process difficult to understand. The assessor's office gets much attention, needs more and better coverage.

Treasurer. Function of this office is self explanatory. Good stories result when tax rolls are announced. From time to time there is a story in the rate at which local taxes are being collected. In Michigan the treasurer must take legal action to collect taxes due. This activity, whether optional or required, provides very readable news.

Auditor. This is a function not clearly understood by many people; taken for granted by others. At the city level the "auditor" is not so much an auditor in the sense that he independently checks transactions of others, reporting independently to some higher level. He is more likely an accountant, a comptroller or

bookkeeper whose job it is to see that city monies are handled properly; that funds are collected and checks made out according to instruction of the city manager or some other authority.

Stories available here consist for the most part of facts and figures concerned with the usual operation of the city. These are sometimes impressive but rarely spectacular. If the auditor should discover something out of order, he would report it to the city manager or some higher official. This person would then become the source for the news.

Courts. Every municipality is served by some type of court or court system. In large cities cases might be designated to courts which specialize, especially in traffic violations. A constant check should be maintained with the court calendar. Names make news, and names are always to be found in courts at this level. Reporting news from the court, however, involves some special circumstances. All news is not privileged so it behoves a reporter who wishes to keep out of trouble to be familiar with those facts he can print and those he cannot print without danger of legal repercussion. The legal aspect of collecting news will be discussed in a subsequent section of this paper.

Civil Service Office. Some cities, mostly large, find it advantageous to maintain a civil service office. T his office is in charge of engaging competent employes and related personnel matters. It is an excellent source of feature stories as well as straight news. Because of the nature of its operation, and depending upon the character of its director, it might be hard to get stories into print. The civil service

office, it seems, tends to be a news source that is often overlooked and underrated.

Dog Pound. To realize that this department exists is to have a lead for a good story. Animals command unusually high readership. Pictures of the pound and its occupants are always feasible feature material. An increase or drop in its population is a news story. So is the appearance of unusual animals. The dog pound is a good place to check frequently, if only by telephone.

Fire Department. This department is the logical source for fast breaking, sometimes very important news stories concerned with fires. Fire prevention stories are good anytime, particularly so during Fire Prevention Week; in fall when grass fires are a danger; in winter when furnaces should be checked. Always a possibility for comparing the number of fire runs or the fire loss in one month with the same month in a previous year.

Many stories almost suggest themselves when a reporter walks into a fire station. How the men cook and care for themselves on duty; new equipment; training; recruitment; small boys and fire engines.

Inspection Departments. The fire, health and the building inspectors' offices offer more good sources of news. People are inclined to be irritated at orders from such inspectors. The orders are usually specific and require prompt compliance. Inspectors may sometimes be arbitrary and unreasonable, but they are responsible in the final analysis to the people whom they are inspecting, so they are more often on sound ground than not.

A controversial story often develops at council meetings when a citizen objects to rulings of the inspector. These instances are usually not of great consequence, but they make good news stories.

Every editor should know if his city benefits from sound inspection. A soft hearted inspector can create undesirable residential areas at the same time he thinks he is doing the home owner a favor by not insisting on specified standards. An overzealous inspector will cause much discomfort and no little reaction from the public.

The duties and benefits of inspectors need to be understood to be appreciated by the citizenry. Good news coverage can perform an important civil service in bringing about this understanding.

Health Departments. All municipalities do not maintain their own health departments, but larger ones do. Since health matters have rated high on numerous recent surveys of reader interest, this department is a good place to check frequently. Health problems are always with a community so there is always a good news potential. Some disease is bound to be first on the list of those causing death, and it will be getting some attention from someone, if only the reader.

More importantly, perhaps, the health department is the source for stories of epidemics or any condition which causes an abnormal percentage of the population to become ill.

This is the office which issues quarantine orders. A report to the public of the number of such orders in effect is bound to command reader interest.

Libraries. Here is a municipal activity which often receives much less attention than it deserves. A reporter who wants to take the time is certain always to have story material. There is a continuous stream of facts connected with newly arrived books; book reviews; number of books issued; types of books issued; trends in books in demand; children or elderly people who use library services; the library staff. While the library might seem a dull assignment at first thought, some imagination and work should produce good, readable stories nearly anytime.

Parks and Recreation.. Because this department deals for the most part with children and competitive sports, it is a natural subject for coverage. There are few subjects which offer so many names of people who might otherwise seldom be mentioned in a newspaper than does recreation. In addition to participants, many city residents take pride in their parks, playgrounds and pools. The seasons of the year offer special opportunities for news coverage.

Police Department. There is always news in a police department. If nothing happens here, even this becomes news. The police station is a regular stop for every newspaper and many newspapers have reporters who devote their time to nothing else.

The police department is such a dramatic, obvious source of news that there is little use dealing longer with it here. It is well to remember, however, that reporters who cover the police beat should be cognizant of the types of news that they are privileged to report and the

information they cannot set to print without the possibility of facing legal action. The matters of records, privilege and invasion of privacy will be discussed in a later section of this paper.

Public Works. Let great amounts of snow or rain fall and this office becomes a particularly good source of news. Streets, alleys, garbage and storm sewers are the stock in trade of the public works department. When there is no emergency, stories can be tied to type and condition of equipment, cost of operation, routine features of operation.

Water and Sanitation. We've all heard that you never miss the water until the well runs dry. The situation is also true in regard to the water and sanitation departments of the city. Increasingly, the water supply is threatening to run dry, and increasingly there is general concern about it.

Both water supply and sewage disposal, because of growing demands upon the system, are coming more and more into the news. Floridation propositions are up for voter consideration one place or another most of the time. The water works itself is worthy of an article from time to time, as is the sewer system. But in matters other than operational, a wise employe in these departments will refer the reporter to some source in the administrative department of the city.

Boards, Commissions and Committees. Every city government sooner or later finds advantage to the utilization of boards, commissions or committees. In general, members of these bodies are appointed by the mayor with agreement of the council. Members usually are private citizens and serve without pay. Effectiveness of the body depends upon the ardor with which the members are willing to work, and degree of activity depends upon public interest at any given moment.

In general, boards reach decisions about specific questions; commissions conduct studies and recommend policy; committees deal with specific problems which arise from time to time and then disband.

Following is a list of categories covered in most cities by boards, commissions or committees:

Art and museums
Planning
Safety
Civil Defense
Elections
History
Zoning
Parks and Recreation
Civic celebrations (Clean-Up Week, Michigan Week, etc.)
Economic Promotion

An editor who wishes to cover his city should be familiar with all commissions, boards and committees. He should evaluate which of these are of most importance to the public. And he should see that news from these bodies is properly covered. To secure a list of these groups and the members who serve thereon should be no great problem. It should be compiled and checked frequently for newsworthiness.

Activity In the Village.

Residents of villages have virtually the same needs as those in cities. Officials of the village are charged with virtually the same responsibility as city officials. By the nature of the village itself, its needs tend to be less pressing, the pace in dealing with them less exacting. Since there are fewer people and more space, village citizens trouble each other less and can avoid each other more easily than in the city. They are more accustomed to getting along with less and to getting along more by themselves.

From a reporter's standpoint there is a vast difference in covering the village than in covering the city.

Perhaps the most apparent is that most officials are not full time village employes. The clerk might be a storekeeper; the treasurer a lawyer; the street commissioner a laborer; the president, fire chief and assessor might be farmers.

This means that it is not always easy to contact the obvious person. He might be in the field or factory at the time convenient for the reporter.

Village business is conducted at the meeting of the village council. This meeting is held according to a predetermined schedule. When there is an issue of general interest, the meeting is likely to be well attended. Decisions are voted upon and recorded.

Nonetheless, an editor who wishes to do a complete job should be sure that the following officers are contacted by a reporter from time to time. Thought and judgment as to the best time will increase efficiency of newsroom operation, but feature stories should be available anytime; news stories part of the time from the following:

Village Council members (a president and six trustees.)
Clerk
Treasurer
Marshal
Street Commissioner
Tax Assessor
Surveyor

In covering village news, a reporter can count heavily upon rumor or gossip for leads. Talk about the town can supply him with starting points for news stories. It should not need to be emphasized that the rumor is only a lead; that the news must come from the proper official

to be worthy of print.

The Township News Task.

Provision for townships was made in law so that certain needs of rural residents could be dealt with in an orderly manner by the people within the specified government unit. The concept is distinctly rural: a sparsely populated community requires fewer government services and perhaps less of the services which it does require.

One interesting fact to bear in mind when considering townships today is their changing nature. As the state develops, as the cities grow, population of the township might rapidly become more dense. The new residents create new problems.

This dynamic growth has resulted in many areas which still operate under township form of government designed originally for an entirely different type of community. Of course, it is always possible for areas within townships to change their local governmental status to that of a city, and some of them do.

For purposes of this discussion, however, we will consider the township as the unit it was originally intended to be: one to deal with rural communities.

The relatively sharp lines of organization which exist at the city level become less distinct when the reporter moves to the village. They become still more hazy when he works with local government news in the township.

The township is governed by its board which meets regularly, at least twice a month according to Michigan law (3, 41.121). The board

consists of a supervisor, two justices of the peace, the treasurer, the township clerk and three elected representatives from the township.

This meeting is generally a good news source. Not only is routine business transacted, but anyone who wishes may attend to submit subjects for consideration. It is not uncommon to see a good deal of controversy displayed at these meetings. The action and issue is often newsworthy.

Law also requires an annual township meeting. These meetings are by no means necessarily cut and dried. If there is an issue of considerable public interest, it is apt to be thrashed out at the annual meeting.

Rural residents are not parlimentarians, but they are sometimes very positive in their opinions. Consequently, the annual meeting can be most active with opponents taking part in heated discussions.

The reporter's task in such instances is to keep the controversy in logical perspective. Heated township controversy might involve important subjects and might also be little more than a tempest in a teapot. There is no necessary correlation between the amount of action and its importance from a news standpoint.

In addition to the board and annual meetings, there are a number of natural news needs to be served in the township.

The clerk's office is perhaps the most consistently, if routinely, active. It is the clerk's duty to hold in custody all records of the township; to keep financial accounts (working with the treasurer) and pay

bills. He has a number of responsibilities connected with registration of voters and with elections.

Chief executive office of a township, however, is not the clerk, but the supervisor. He presides at meetings, represents the township on the county board of supervisors, and in general, administers policies defined by the board.

Perhaps the most important of all his duties, at least from many landowner's standpoint, is that of assessing property for taxation purposes.

The supervisor is often a farmer who spends most of his time farming rather than supervising. But he is usually available for comment or interview, and the reporter should have little trouble in contacting him for news. Other township officials, it can be noted, are likely to share these characteristics.

The township is also required to have a treasurer. In addition to serving on the board, his main function is to collect all monies belonging to the township. This includes taxes as assessed by the supervisor, non-resident highway taxes or other funds due the township from other governmental units.

Since many people have an interest in tax income, the treasurer is a news source which should be covered several times each year. The amount of tax income expected, the rate of collection, the final accounting make good stories. So do actions required to collect delinquent taxes.

The transition in township size brings about a situation worthy of note for reporters. In some instances the treasurer was paid a percentage of what he collected. At the time this provision was established, the income derived was small. Since rapid growth of areas and the increased rate of taxation work to provide a vastly greater tax to be collected, the percentage of this amounted to a sizable sum.

A situation developed where the treasurer's position was a fine financial plum because the renumeration was sizable.

It is only natural that the treasurer should enjoy a percentage-of-the-tax-income arrangement when taxes are going up rapidly. It is also natural under the same circumstances that others in the township want to change the basis for treasurer's pay.

Therefore, taxation (and treasurer's income) is a subject to be examined frequently by a reporter who wishes to cover the township scene.

Each of the two justices of the peace are check points for news stories.

A justice court may try civil or criminal cases of a relatively minor variety (3, 666.1-8 and 774.1) and is delegated certain powers of higher courts. The justice is required to maintain a docket which may offer news leads. From time to time a reportable story may be discovered by contacting the justice.

Two boards within the framework of township government which bear watching are the zoning board and the board of appeals.

The first board approves or rejects plans for building proposed within the township; the second hears objections from property owners who argue that they have been assessed unfairly.

Townships have, in varying numbers, additional bodies which play a part in municipal government. A list of these should be available from the clerk or supervisor. It should be secured and studied by the reporter. The following type activities will appear on such lists:

lighting
fire protection
parks and recreation
planning

Such a list will vary according to the needs and nature of the township.

CHAPTER V

COVERING THE COUNTY

The Largest Division of Local Government.

In addition to being the largest unit of local government, the county tends to be the most remote from the people. This is, for one thing, a simple matter of geography. The county seat is not "the old home town," nor is its operation concerned exclusively for any one municipality within its boundaries. On the other hand, much of the county's business may concern little, if at all, some of the communities of which it consists. Because of economic development and population growth, counties are of various sizes with various needs and various types of government. The operation of Wayne County which consists primarily of Detroit suburbs, for example, is quite different from that of Chippewa in the Upper Peninsula. Nonetheless, all counties are required by law to perform certain duties and provide certain services. It is the common characteristics which can be discussed in general here.

A reporter who has a background understanding of counties and their operation is in a likely position to increase and improve his knowledge of any specific county where he might be assigned.

The Courthouse.

Hub of official and much unofficial activity in county government is the courthouse, located at the county seat. The courthouse is to the county and its government the same as a city hall is to city government. It houses administrative offices, several courtrooms and is the location of meetings of the board of supervisors. The board of supervisors is similar to a city council, and it consists of supervisors from townships within the county; mayors and other officials from cities. The county jailhouse, with the sheriff's office, is usually located nearby.

Many of the reportorial procedures outlined previously in discussion of city coverage can be applied when covering the county. There are additional offices to be covered, but functions are similar.

Partisan politics is apt to play a much more important role at the county level than at those already discussed. Party affiliation is more important in campaigning and party control is more important. Party lines extend from state offices into the county and there can be much activity along those lines.

Party discipline can have effect in actions and decisions of office holders at the county level often, where this is much less likely to be the case at municipal levels. The wise reporter will analyze actions in certain instances to see if this discipline is being exercised.

The necessity to file certain legal papers at the courthouse as well as the usual activities of the courts located there make it a place

frequented by lawyers. This traffic, together with the comings and goings of supervisors and other local officials, make the courthouse a point of genuine activity. In the proper and incidental business of all these people can always be found source material for news stories.

The reporter who has time should make the rounds of offices and officials; courts and meetings. News and feature stories are to be found everywhere.

The County Officials.

In the county there is no counterpart for the city's mayor. Closest person to it is the chairman of the board of supervisors. This is a position with much less power and prestige than that of mayor. Often it is rotated according to a predetermined plan. The chairman does preside at board meetings and becomes, therefore, a sort of official spokesman for the body.

The board does meet "with open doors" (3, 46.3) and its meetings are a must for a reporter.

The relationship between the board of supervisors and the elected officials which we will consider next has some interesting aspects which can lead to strange happenings in county government.

The officials are elected by the people of the county. They cannot be hired or fired by the board of supervisors. This gives them a certain independence. If you choose to look at it a different way, this makes a problem for the board desiring to set policy for the county government which varies greatly from the direction the official wishes to take.

The board does have one important weapon in seeking to control the officials: pursestrings. The board of supervisors can be generous or stingy when it comes to allocating funds.

This organizational situation makes for a struggle for power if board members and officials do not work in harmony. In this battle the reporter may find he is sought out by both sides: the official who argues that the board won't provide money for him to operate; the board spokesman who argues that the official will not function within the bounds of "common sense."

Needless to say, this is a situation where the reporter should confine his efforts strictly to impartial reporting. In so doing he can gain the respect, if not the gratitude, of both factions.

The Board of Auditors.

If the county has a board of auditors, its members and the minutes from its meetings have news potential. Such a board has important responsibilities which include checking expenditures, authorizing purchases, specifying the number of employes in certain offices and a number of others.

The County Treasurer.

The treasurer is elected by the people of the county. He handles county funds and supervises collection proceedings which become necessary.

The County Clerk.

This official is also elected by the people of the county. His office is responsible for numerous activities within the county. This includes election registrations and voting totals, marriage and other forms of licenses. He is also charged with duties as clerk of circuit court, board of supervisors and board of county and district canvassers.

The clerk is likely to be a man in an active office; a source of news and news tips.

The Reigster of Deeds.

While this office is very important to the person who seeks to identify the owner of certain pieces of land, it is not in itself a first rate news source.

A reporter should certainly know the register of deeds as a man and should be familiar with activity of the office. He should also know that he, like all private citizens, has a right to examine records kept there. Upon occasion he can secure a good news story in real estate transactions. When new titles are filed, an alert reporter may be able to secure a valuable lead.

He can also compare the rate at which deeds are being filed with a similar period and interpret the difference to make a story with a good local angle.

Prosecuting Attorneys.

County prosecutors, like other officials discussed here, are elected by voters of the county. Their activities are always apt to make news and

close attention should be paid to them at all times. The reasons the prosecutor makes a good news source are obvious.

What is not so obvious, and what should be understood by those attempting to report and interpret a prosecutor's activities, are a few things about the prosecutor and his general situation.

First, the prosecutor must be a lawyer. Salaries set for the post of county prosecutor are notoriously so low in many instances that there are records of counties where no lawyer would take the job. Second, the prosecutor must run for office every two years. Third, the prosecutor can develop enemies and lose friends in his work much more rapidly than he can develop friends and lose enemies. Fourth, his duties in prosecuting defendents and acting as legal advisor to the board of supervisors and other county officials can be tedious and time consuming.

In short, the prosecutor's office is not one that is likely to attract strong men and competent, experienced attorneys. More likely the prosecutor will be a weak, not-so-smart lawyer who finds it difficult to make his living competing with stronger attorneys in the community.

An exception to this is the youthful attorney who hasn't had time to build a practice or the prosecutor who seeks to use the position as a step to a better place in politics or the legal profession.

Suffice it to say that the prosecutor may be much less than the wisest attorney in a county.

This means he is subject to pressures of harder, faster thinking, more experienced attorneys who may be defending those whom he must

prosecute. This also means that he can be talked out of efforts for conviction on a more serious charge in exchange for a plea of guilty to a less serious charge.

At the same time the prosecutor avoids a hard court battle with the real risk that he will lose the case altogether, he can, by accepting a guilty plea to a lesser charge, build up his record of convictions. This act also reduces chances that the decision will be reversed by a higher court because of error in his procedure.

This situation makes a genuine temptation for a prosecutor, and no evaluation of a prosecutor can be accurate if it is not considered.

The Sheriff and the Jail.

There is the same sort of drama connected with the sheriff as with the prosecutor. Some really big stories break from his office, and it is almost always good for feature material. In addition to the violence which seems to attract readership, a reporter can collect facts about the "more routine" activities in a sheriff's office. The number of driver's licenses issued; the number of traffic accidents; number of prisoners; all such information is reportable.

Many a good feature has developed from a reporter spending the evening riding in a sheriff's patrol car.

It should be remembered that sheriff's and their deputies are apt to be lowest paid and least well trained of all police officials. The sheriff is elected and may know nothing at all of police administration. His deputies may have been campaign workers.

This point is emphasized so that the reporter will be alerted to consider it, and therefore better understand the sheriff's department, its operation and its background. It is not to state categorically that sheriffs are incompetent; it simply is to underline some practical financial facts of county government.

Coroners in the County.

Covering the coroner and the morgue is perhaps the most grisly aspect of county news, but it is also important. The coroner is called to determine the cause of death of anyone who dies "suddenly, accidentally, violently or as the result of any suspicious circumstances or without medical attention up to and including at least 36 hours prior to the hour of death" (3, 773.19).

Naturally, his decisions can make important news stories.

The coroner is apt to be a local doctor, or still more apt to be a local mortician who might be hoping to build his funeral business as a result of his official duties.

At any rate, the reporter should know the coroner, and how best to obtain information from him.

Courts in the Courthouse.

Circuit and Probate judges hold court in the county courthouse. A reporter must remember when dealing with courts that he does not have the same prerogatives as when dealing with other public offices. Some of these differences will be discussed later in this paper.

The Probate Court is concerned primarily with the administration of estates, the care of minors and with juveniles who have broken the law. News of its activities are not privileged without permission of the judge (3, 712A.28), but much printable news can be gathered with consent of the judge or by checking his calendar and making inquiries suggested by it.

The Circuit Court convenes according to a calendar set well beforehand. Its jurisdiction is extensive in both civil and criminal catagories. Reporters can be present in the courtroom and report upon activities, testimonies and court decisions. There is a considerable variation among judges as to the reporting of certain types of information and the use of cameras in courtrooms. A reporter should know those procedures of which a judge approves and use all that are desirable in collecting and reporting his news. It might be more appropriate if the reporter knows those procedures of which a judge does not approve and avoid them best as possible.

Those counties which maintain a friend of the court office provide another point for news leads. This office deals with the poverty stricken, those in marital difficulties or other domestic difficulties. To know the people and problems handled there is to be aware of excellent feature material and clews to good news sources.

Additional News Sources.

Most of the activity does take place in or near the courthouse, but there are other points worth checking. These include the county

hospital, poor farm, orphanage, animal shelter, parks and social welfare offices.

Once again, the competent reporter will find a list of these points from the county clerk or other source, and check each one as often as he thinks advisable.

CHAPTER VI

THE SCHOOLS, THE NEWSPAPER AND THE NEWS

The Finest News Opportunity.

Few people realize or appreciate the scope of the school operation in the community. It is obvious that the school system deals with the community's most precious commodity, that the shaping of young minds and characters is of vital importance. That school systems are expensive is accepted as a fact of everyday life.

Most residents never stop to consider, however, that the school operation is very sizable when compared to businesses or industries in the same area. In many communities the school system is the employer of the largest number of persons, constitutes biggest capital investment and requires the most complicated administration procedures of any single organization.

Schools, because of their function, their scope of operation and because they are publically financed, are news.

William H. Roe, educational administration expert at Michigan State University, wrote in the introduction of Schools are News (4):

> Basically, the strength and effectiveness of a local school system depends upon the understanding and support it receives from the community. But how do we nourish understanding and support? 'Effective communication' is the answer given by the Michigan Communications Study after five years of study and research.

Certainly a newspaper can be the best source of communications between the school and the home. In some areas newspapers and schools

work together to disseminate news, and such a harmonious relationship should be the aim of all educators and journalists.

The facts are, however, that in many communities the reporting of school affairs leaves much to be desired by parents and other interested citizens. This may be the fault of the school or the newspaper or a combination of both.

The challenge to improve school news coverage, on the other hand, is one which stimulates many to attempt to do just that.

The reporter may find himself working with a school system where he is welcome as an aid to public understanding or suspected as a potential troublemaker. In either instance it is his job to do the best he can under the circumstances.

The School Administrator.

The educating unit nearest to the reader is the local school. This is usually one of several which make up a school district. Each school has a principal in charge, though in some cases, one of the teachers may be assigned principal's duties. The principal puts into effect orders he receives from the school superintendent, the chief administrative official of the school district. The superintendent is hired by the local school board, members of which are elected by the public.

As head of what might be the biggest "business" of the community, the superintendent's duties are considerable. His operation becomes more complicated day by day. School finance problems and solutions grow more involved, enrollments increase rapidly, good teachers become harder to hire, cost of operation mounts.

In general, it will be observed that school administrators are a rather able lot. They have a difficult job: to keep both teachers and public satisfied at the same time they maintain efficient educating systems.

The superintendent is the proper source for school news pertaining to policies and administrative decisions. He either sets these, or has them set for him by the school board. His office should be aware of everything which takes place in the schools. A good working relationship with him is important, and no news coverage can be complete without it.

Members of the Board.

Citizens of the community are elected to serve on the school board. In a high percentage of cases there is little or no contest for these positions and few votes are cast. Occasionally, of course, an issue will develop and the election will take on great voter interest.

In theory board members set policy under which the school will operate, and this is usually the case from a legal, if not a working, standpoint. Board members do vote and record their decisions. But a strong school superintendent can be so logical, so much better informed and so persuasive that he can determine by his presentation of the issue what policy will be supported by the board. Actually, then, it is well to remember that the school board is often less a factor than is commonly supposed. This is not to discuss the merit of such a circumstance, but merely to note that the general condition exists.

A strong superintendent will take care to do what he can to see to it that only those people who will support his views are voted to board

membership. He cannot always control this, but when he loses such control, he increases the chance that he will be replaced. This serves as important motivation.

Many board members, it will be found, have held their positions for a long period, They serve without charge, meet frequently (once a month or so), make important decisions about important matters. For the most part they are well motivated. They wish to do a good job for the community; to add to their reputations as solid citizens.

All of these factors combine to create an impression in some board member's minds that the school system is their personal corporation run for benefit of the public. They forget that efficiencies possible in operating private businesses are not always possible in school administration because people of a community have much, much more to say about schools.

So board members often act according to their impression of the public good even if they sometimes attempt to facilitate matters by discouraging public interest.

One difficulty with this attitude is that the nature of the public changes. Board members may have served for many years: when they themselves had children in school; when there were farms in the community. When farms are subdivided into 75 foot lots, and their own children graduated, the same person can easily miss the significance of these changes and fail to reflect the needs and desires of the newer population.

School board meetings are open to the public in most cases. Michigan law (16) does not specify that they must be, but by choice and custom most boards permit the public and the press at most meetings. It is the exceptions which take on importance, since big news stories may be missed.

In Michigan there are records of reporters being asked to leave meetings, though it is more common for the board to meet secretly to decide informally what action to take later at a formal meeting.

Where he faces difficulty in collecting news, the reporter has a battle he must fight according to the circumstances; in most cases he can get some news from the superintendent. Again, speaking generally, the school people are more anxious to withhold information about circumstances leading to their decisions than about the decision itself.

The reporter can (and should) attend board meetings. In addition he can chat with board members about school matters at their work or as he meets them socially. If he fails to attend the board meeting he can phone the superintendent later to learn what took place. This is not the best way of reporting school board information and is subject to risk already mentioned in this paper.

Working the Source.

The reporter will find that routine news about the school's administration is available from the superintendent and at the school board meeting.

The superintendent's office will be the source for other news which is not routine. Accidents, special cases where students take action which makes news (perhaps a lunchroom strike against eating school supplied food), fresh developments in campaigns to pass bonding issues or school construction program, these and similar developments should be covered by contacting the superintendent.

The ideal reporter-superintendent relationship would mean that the superintendent would make it a point to contact the reporter about non-routine news. This is a goal at which the reporter can aim, and it is by no means an impossible one.

At all times the reporter must keep in mind the importance of news stories to the superintendent. Inaccurate publicity can cause a great deal of difficulty for the superintendent and the school system. In highly controversial situations, like the voting of a bond issue, sloppy reporting can mean the difference between winning and losing the proposition. A reporter who will not take the length of time required to study and understand subjects connected with the school's operation is not likely to win complete confidence of the superintendent. In behalf of superintendents, it can be said when one considers the inexperienced, uninformed reporters with which some of them must deal they cannot be blamed for withholding some kinds of information.

On the other hand, the well qualified reporter is apt to find himself dealing with a superintendent who does not understand the advantages or responsibilities of reporting in full to the public.

The best a reporter can make of his situation is to work to inform himself fully about school matters and then press as hard as necessary for information he needs to turn out complete news stories for his readers.

Good Once a Year.

There are certain news stories which are of interest each year as the school organizes and gets underway for another 12 month's operation. One of these is the publication of the annual report. The annual report is required by law to be published, but in a manner which can benefit greatly by interpretation. This is where a competent school reporter can perform a service to his readers anddemonstrates as well his grasp of school affairs.

In addition, the reporter should be interested in the following list of stories which is taken from Schools are News, (4, p. 29) a booklet which should be read by everyone interested in reporting school news. He can keep a file so that he can easily bring each subject up to date.

School census figures.
Graduation.
Renewal of teacher contracts.
New teachers.
Gifts children are making for Christmas.
High school graduates going to college.
New equipment purchased during the summer.
Contribution of federal givernment to school lunch program.
School health program.
Annual school activities (annual art exhibit, band festival, senior trip, etc.
Summary of physical facilities of the school.
Bus transportation, equipment and schedules.
Adult education program.
Community use of the schools.

Special education facilities.
Auxiliary services---one story on each department.
Attendance officers.
Analysis of absences for the year. (Reason for hooky, etc.)
Drop-out rate and holding power of schools.
Results of any annual group tests given to determine subject competence of the students as compared to national norms.
American Education Week plans.
Book Week plans.

This list, like others presented in this paper, is by no means complete. It can be enlarged profitably by any reporter who spends time observing and thinking.

School Activities.

The news which comes from the superintendent's office is by no means the only news available in the schools. Names are news, and names of school children are no exception. The school room and its students offer a continual source of feature stories.

A glance at a newspaper shows that the school activity which receives more attention than any other is athletics. High school sports receive consistent news attention, and readership surveys show these stories receive a hugh degree of readership. It might be noted that this situation is often the subject for lament among those who encourage more "mature" interest in behalf of the community. It is also noted that athletics are generally covered by the sports department of the newspaper, and can be considered to have only a remote connection with local government news coverage.

There are other organizations connected with the school, and they should be considered now and again by the school reporter to evaluate their importance as factors in the local government scenes.

The PTA, for example, might be concerned with a program to revamp curricula or build an auditorium, etc. Or it might be hearing talks on civic subjects. If the PTA is acting it may make news; if it is listening, chances are it will not.

PTA organizations are inclined to be or to become cheering sections for the school administrators, but should they actually take news-worthy action, the reporter should know about it.

There nearly always seems to be something concerned with schools that offers subject for public interest. The expert reporter is one who can sense these subjects and quickly devise a feature applicable to it.

If there is a campaign for a new library, for example, the reporter can describe existing facilities, with quotations from leaders in the campaign, and from leaders of the opposition should there be any.

The public hears of its school problems in general terms: overcrowding, low pay for teachers, too much or too little discipline, training methods that are too conservative or too progressive. He can perform a valuable civic task if he writes stories dealing with specifics on each of these subjects, or on others which come to community attention.

Photography is particularly valuable in school stories. There is such a variety of scenes and of subjects that the supply is literally limitless.

Suffice it to say when dealing with school coverage that the only bounds upon a reporter are his own imagination and the maximums set by his editor.

The Declining Empire

Less important in school coverage than the local school and school district is the county school system. Essentially the county school superintendent is concerned with supervising activities of rural schools. He can make recommendations and supply guidance, but he has very little actual power.

According to Thelma Puckett, administrative assistant to the Michigan superintendent of public instruction, the county superintendent's office is growing steadily less important in most ways, and this includes its position as a news source.

An exception to this dull news role which this office plays concerns the transfer of property from one school district to another. In such instances, however, the issue is usually very heated, and the collection of news is no problem.

The trend in education is for school districts to be forced into new and larger units for purposes of more efficient operation. As these consolidations take place, the need for the county superintendent's supervision becomes less and less necessary.

It is wise, of course, for the reporter covering school news to contact the county superintendent, make his acquaintance and know something about him and his office.

CHAPTER VII

ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION

The Fight for Facts

It is almost certain that a reporter will sooner or later find his quest for information challenged on grounds that he has no legal right to attend certain meetings or examine certain records. When this becomes the case he can fall back upon one of two attacks: the legal or the editorial. The alternative is to drop the issue.

From a practical standpoint the "editorial" attack, or the threat to apply it, is the more effective weapon when it comes to prying information from public officials. But it is comforting to know that rhetoric based upon the moral public right to secure information can be backed up specifically by law. Secondly, some office holders who are inclined to stand up to editorial pressure on grounds that they are within their rights will not withhold information if they can be shown specifically that they are acting contrary to law.

There are too many newspaper publishers who are unwilling or unable to force by legal action the opening of meetings or records. The weak newspaper is apt to find itself frustrated from information it seeks regardless of the law if it is not able to command respect from office holders.

Specifically, the reporter or publication faced with a situation where facts are unavailable will do well to take all possible support from the law. If this is not sufficient, then editorial pressures must be built which will release the information.

Protection in the Law.

The law regarding public access to information and meetings of government units varies from state to state. An examination of the law is the only way a reporter can learn his legal rights. In many instances, the access provisions of the state law have been studied and condensed by a legal authority. Such a procedure, of course, is a great time saver, not to mention expense.

In Michigan such an examination was conducted by Dr. Fred S. Siebert, J.D., head of the School of Journalism at Michigan State University. Dr. Siebert searched the Michigan constitution and statute records to prepare his paper, "Freedom of Information Statutes in Michigan" (16). An introduction to his study defines briefly but clearly the reporter's rights and identifies those situations which are not covered by law. He says:

> Attached is a listing of the statutes of the state of Michigan (enacted up to July, 1958) pertaining to public access to records and proceedings of government bodies. The listing is organized under six headings, the first five on records of various governmental units and the sixth on open meetings.
>
> The "record" statutes are in turn divided into two listings: (1) statutes which specifically state that the public, including reporters, have access to these records, and (2) statutes which merely state that certain records are required to be kept without a specific requirement that these be open to the public. It cannot be assumed that because a record is required to be kept that it is also open for inspection.

Among the noteworthy aspects of Michigan law on public records are the following:

(1) The state constitution (Art. X, sec. 18) makes all financial records of the state and counties open to public inspection, but makes no reference to records other than financial or to financial records of other units of government such as cities, townships, and schools.

(2) The basic Michigan statute on records (750.492) applies to all records of the counties, townships and cities but does not include records of school districts or of state agencies. Conversely, there is no state law requiring access to school records or to records of state agencies other than financial records.

(3) Michigan does not have at the present time a general law providing for access to the proceedings of government units. Under present statutes (listed on p. 39 enclosed) meetings of Home Rule cities, Fourth Class cities, County Board of Supervisors, Township Boards, and sessions of the state legislature are open to reporters.

Not specifically open by law are meetings of municipal bodies, (other than those listed above) meetings of school boards, and meetings of state agencies.

Police and Court Records.

This is an area of reportorial operation which is hazy. It would be convenient if all situations could be dealt with as black or white, but the fact is that many situations are gray, so that it is difficult to know whether the law specifies the records are open or not.

In general it can be said that court records are open to the public.

Police records, once the case is complete, are open to the public. Complaints registered at the police station are not privileged, and an officer, though he may release such records at his discretion, is within

his rights if he refuses to release information about them.

Each case where an issue develops about availability of information must be decided upon according to its individual circumstances. Here again the aggressive, thinking, reporter is more likely to come up with facts he needs than is the dullard. Here again the reporter with a reputation for integrity, common sense and fair play has an advantage.

From a practical standpoint, much depends on police station procedure. Many officials have a policy of releasing much information. This reduces the chance an issue will develop. A police official who chooses to withhold information can cause a reporter much difficulty, and becomes therefore, the key to a problem to be dealt with. Some of the information discussed in the last section of this chapter then becomes pertinent.

Importance of "The Last Word."

A word of caution is in order regarding the reporter's effort to understand his legal position. He must continue his search for legal support up to the latest possible date. Existing shortcomings can become issues for future legislation.

Such is likely to be the case with Dr. Siebert's paper. The areas which he identified as those where public does not have a clear right to information became within months the subjects for bills in the Michigan legislature. As these become law, the reporter's position will become stronger.

In most states the state press association, Sigma Delta Chi, aroused citizens or a combination of such agents are working to get more laws which will protect "The People's Right to Know."

Obviously, a reporter who can support by law his contention that he has a right to certain public information is in a stronger position than if he cannot.

The Editorial Effort to Secure Information.

Public officials who hold meetings in private or refuse to release information fall into one of three categories. They are either righteously withholding facts "for public good" (and it may be well to remember that they might sometimes be on sound ground), they are ignoring the idea that the public has a right to know about its business on grounds that it disturbs efficient operation, or they are attempting to cover up information for personal benefit.

Perhaps they can be coaxed from their position, but it is more likely they must be moved by pressure the reporter can build with his editorial comment or his contact with prominent people in the community.

This can easily become a battle of wits which can be won only after sustained and intelligent pressures. It is well for the reporter to remember in such situations that the actual or implied threat to take action can be more nerve racking to the official than the action itself.

No public official enjoys being held up to the public eye for ridicule or takes pride in the suggestion that he is not doing his job properly. The news story or editorial which can strike home at these

points is likely to result in success. The writer must be careful to deal in issues rather than personalities for best results. So confident of editorial pressures are some newspapers that they almost boast that they need no law.

One reporter found he could secure access to certain meetings by suggesting continually that certain suspicious sounding actions were not undertaken. He would write for example, "The president of the school board denied that board members, meeting in closed session, had investigated a shortage of school funds." This procedure may be open to question from an ethical standpoint, but it is also a means which might be justified because of the end it attained.

The reporter must also be prepared to lose, at least temporarily, his battle because of public apathy. It is possible that in the absence of controversial issues, the citizenry simply will not become aroused. In such instances he must be content with establishing the record. Almost surely it will not be long before some issues will develop which will permit him to press for his point more favorably.

The newspaper which is refused access to public business has a battle on its hand. If it accepts the challenge and fights hard and wisely, there is always opportunity to win its point. If it accepts the condition rather than the challenge, chances are very good that it will never win such access. Chances are also nearly certain that it will command less respect in the community.

At all levels of government there has been a growing tendency to withhold information "for the public welfare." This trend grew greatly at the national level with the obvious need for secrecy during war time.

Politicians and office holders apparently found protecting the public welfare by this means so agreeable that more and more of them found more and more ways to withhold information.

Nor have the "advantages" been lost to the politician at the local level. There is little doubt that the general practice at the national level has helped develop a similar pattern at the state and local levels.

Even as national publisher organizations, leading editors and similar groups have been fighting to reverse the national trend to withhold information which should be available to the public, so must each reporter, editor and publisher fight in his local situation. The local newspaper's situation will be greatly strengthened if the withholding trend can be curbed at the national level, and the effort at the national level will be strengthened if newspaper people can turn the tide in their own communities.

The withholding of information which properly should be made public is a practice not to be taken lightly. The entire democratic process is based on votes cast by people informed of the issues.

If there is any common ground upon which newspapers and other media can meet, it is in the battle to keep public records and meetings open. This is an issue where idealism and long-term practical outlook are exactly congruent. The news gatherer who compromises the principle for a short range advantage does himself long range damage; the entire community in general and the field of journalism in particular immediate and sizable disservice.

CHAPTER VIII

MORE PROBLEMS IN PUBLISHING LOCAL GOVERNMENT NEWS

News That's Fit to Print.

A continuous responsibility of every editor is to decide what news stories shall appear in the columns of the newspaper. This means that he must select from all stories available those which shall be published, those which cannot be published simply because of space limitations and those which shall not appear because of the effect they might have upon the community. The editor can also determine the "tone" or attitude which shall be reflected in editorial columns, and to a lesser but possibly more effective degree, the "color" which shall be reflected in news columns. This is a sizable responsibility, and one which can be dealt with in many ways.

Simplest way to determine this is for the publisher or editor, or a board if the newspaper has one, to set certain policies. This is usually done either consciously or unconsciously by someone on every newspaper staff. Policies frequently include such points:

> Everyone shall receive equal treatment in news columns.
> If the subject is newsworthy, it shall be printed.

This seems very well, but actually it is not that simple. Everyone cannot receive equal treatment as compared to everyone else, nor is

everyone entitled to it. What happens to the mayor is more newsworthy than if the same thing happens to someone else. It is sometimes possible that the public good can best be served by withholding, not printing some information which is exceedingly newsworthy.

Anyone can blindly follow a policy which seems sound, using the policy as a defense for the consequences, but this is not always sensible.

The fact is that editing takes judgment. The editor can be guided by policy, but should not be enslaved by it. The judgment displayed by an editor is one of the principle criteria for his reputation.

The editor's judgment carries with it important responsibility for his community, for his newspaper and for himself.

The editor must expect to be subjected to pressure to print or not to print certain news items. How well he deals with this pressure also measures his ability. To deal well takes, in addition to judgment, courage and tact. It is one thing to decide wisely what course to take; it is another thing to convince people involved that the decision was wise or equitable.

Problems to Face.

A frequent pressure upon a newspaper involves an arrest of a prominent local person. A politician or businessman often thinks the report of a charge against him or a member of his family will result in unusual personal loss--either customers or votes. The editor must decide, and sometimes under threat of reprisal, whether to print the story or not.

A classic situation, dear to the hearts of those who argue to withhold public information, involves the considerations of a public body about purchase of property. It is obvious that such news, announced before the purchase is made, could result in the increase in the price of the property or nearby property. It is equally obvious that editors with such information, if they have the interests of their communities at heart, would do nothing to increase unnecessarily the taxpayer's expense.

Almost as often referred to by those who desire to withhold news is the charge involving the morals of a school teacher or public official. Understandably, there is desire by officials to embarrass no one, especially if the charge later proves to be unfounded. These situations must be treated as individual cases, and judgment certainly must be exercised. But there is one hard fact of life that many do not take into consideration when demanding blindly that the newspaper have no access to such situations: the tendency of people to gossip. Simply because a newspaper does not print a story on a subject like this is no guarantee that the subject will not be known in the community. In fact, a newspaper story can easily be a great benefit to the one charged because it establishes the charge in print. Verbal reports in the community tend to become bigger and more startling as they pass from one person to another so that the gossip can do infinitely more harm than a newspaper report.

Youth in Trouble.

In some states the question of printing names of juveniles involved in minor crimes is one which must be faced by the editor. There are good

reasons to argue for either side of this question, and some editors do print such names.

In Michigan, however, the editor need not decide about this problem. According to law (3, 712A.27) records of the Probate Court are not privileged. If he does print names of juvenile offenders, the editor can face contempt of court proceedings. Despite this, some newspapers do carry names of juveniles without difficulty. In fact, some Probate judges do not seem aware of the law on this point. The newspaper which does not conform may have no trouble for a long period, but it must also live with the fact that it does not conform to the law and it must face the threat of court action from someone who wants to make an issue of its practice.

The "Two Purpose" Story

Even as the editor or reporter will be urged not to print some stories, so might he be strongly encouraged to print others. Sometimes an article can have effects on groups or individuals in a community separate and aside from providing information. Announcement that someone was seen in a certain place or engaged in a certain activity may be meant to stimulate opposition or serve warning of some sort.

More common is the effort of an individual or someone in his behalf to make use of newspaper space to keep his name before the public. For example, the story of an official visiting his dear old widowed mother or engaged in some similar activity can be considered to create a kindly image of a politician and result in a few more votes.

Reporters and editors should be on the lookout for stories with dubious purposes. When they suspect they are being used in this way, they should look the gift horse squarely in the mouth.

It may be that the duplicity is harmless, or that the newspaper is willing to go along for one reason or another. The real danger is more in being used without the editor realizing it than in helping an aspiring politician convince the public that he really is a very nice fellow.

So we see that getting news of local government is only part of the newspaper's job. Someone must also decide which stories and how many of them shall be printed.

Into that decision should go several factors: the wisdom of a judge; the charity of a clergyman; the merchandising skill of a salesman.

CHAPTER IX

THE PROBLEM OF READERSHIP

There's No Guarantee.

Editors are familiar with the feeling that some people have about material they submit for publication. These people seem to think that if a story is printed, it will automatically be read by everyone. Editors know that such is not the case.

Readership surveys are carried on continually in an effort to learn what type of newspaper stories and what methods of writing can interest most readers. One of the things editors know is that news of local government does not normally command 100% readership. They know that some facts of great significance to the public tend to be skipped by the reader, presumably because they are difficult to grasp and because they seem more remote than they really are.

Anyone who has tried to write a story about the school's annual report knows the feeling that most subscribers will not bother to read and understand pertinent financial facts. The same is true with budget stories for cities; for county tax equalization stories; of many others.

The problem of securing readership for important if "routine" information is a serious one for the newspaper and for the community. An effective voting public must be an informed public.

Some Suggested Solutions.

If the reporter or editor is willing to devote some extra effort to the preparation of local government news stories, it is likely improved readership will result. Various procedures, call them tools of the journalist's skill or gimmicks, can command more attention than straight, unimaginative reporting.

Dramatization with pictures, with layout and headlines, with feature treatment can help.

The Midland Daily News, which had carried many stories of the council's deliberations about what should be done with a city dump, dramatized the subject with front page photographs and a story. A constructive decision was reached within a week. The dump in this instance was situated in what had once been the edge of town. Subsequent expansion of the city meant that the dump was surrounded by development, including a shopping area.

The productive news treatment was not complicated. A photograph was printed showing the dump in all its distasteful but inherent untidiness. Beside this picture was one of a new parking lot opened by another city. Cutlines pointed out that the space occupied by the dump could much more valuably be turned into a parking lot like the one shown. At the same time an ugly sight would become a practical asset, and more pleasing to the eye.

Promotion of a series of articles specially written on a local government problem can build readership. This is a device available to any newspaper and used by many.

Another is to invite signed articles from prominent people in the community.

Assembling information into question and answer articles makes some subjects more acceptable to the reader. Use of bold face type attracts still more attention. The use of "Editor's Note" with an explanatory paragraph can also catch the reader's eye.

Personalize to Pep It Up.

For many years young reporters were told, and publishers themselves directed a policy something like this: Only news will appear in the news columns; opinion will be plainly labelled and will appear only on the editorial page.

This is a neat formula. It would be nice if it worked successfully.

The fact is, however, that the reading public seems to prefer a little drama in the news, especially if it is injected cleverly. A report which does not stick exactly to the facts and manages to entertain as it informs, it seems, has a much better chance of being read than one which piously and without color reports the incident accurately.

The great increase in circulation of news-magazines, especially Time and Life, can be attributed in large part to the news magazines' ability to provide background, color and liveliness to straight news.

Newspaper columnists who interpret rather than simply report news have sizable and ardent followings.

The increasing complexity of local government makes it advisable for newspaper editors, if they are fully to inform their readers, to

consider seriously the advantages inherent in some of these practices. If they find ways to interpret, to provide background, to dramatize local government news, they insure a higher degree of readership. By doing these things competently, they better meet their responsibility of informing the public of the facts of local government life.

Karl F. Zeisler, University of Michigan journalism professor writing in the Michigan Alumnus Quarterly Review (18), says that today's newspaper editorials are still in the buggy whip era. He says editorials would be pepped up if "newspapers would let editorial writers write, under bylines, what they actually think and believe.

Here are some of the other suggestions he makes about editorial writing. They are pertinent in this paper because a newspaper doing its job will have a high percentage of editorials about local government affairs:

> Personalize editorials as is done with features and columns.
>
> "Splash" an editorial on the front page from time to time. Use big type, color or pictures to attract attention to it.
>
> Talk back in the editorial column to some of the "Constant Readers" letters. One sidedness is more effective in creating readership and effecting change than is impartiality.
>
> Stop using the editorial "we." It has become colorless, anonymous and meaningless.
>
> Learn more about the techniques of opinion forming.

Say It Again.

The reporter must be willing to repeat important information about certain government procedures if he is expected to keep his readers informed. Newspapers have been criticized, perhaps with justification, for emphasizing speed in reporting rather than depth. At any rate, the reporter and editor should remember that newspapers are not textbooks; that readers are not students; that something which appeared yesterday might not have been read by many subscribers, was forgotten by others and not clearly understood by still others.

Repetition of facts which help make a story more understandable is a virtue which could well be considered by more editors.

There Is a Best Time.

Timeliness offers still another opportunity to squeeze additional readership from the otherwise routine news story about local government. A simple example is traffic safety. A story about a police campaign against speeders, for instance, would command more readership just before a holiday than just afterward. A report from a planning commission would have more significance if published while a community was considering a bond issue for a civic improvement than otherwise.

Timeliness is a sense which can be developed by a newsman willing to work with it. It is to be valued as much or more as the characteristic known as "a nose for news."

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

Changing and Constant Aspects in Local Government News.

The newspaper reader of today is not the same in all respects as he was 50 years ago---or even 20 years ago. Since World War II he has changed especially.

Today's reader is now one of a dynamic, expanding population. It is more likely he has lived a short time in the community than it is he has maintained a long residence. He does not know everybody in town, in fact, he may know no one at all. He might live in a suburb rather than a city.

In short, today's reader does not have the social roots in the community which those of previous years had.

The new reader and his family living in a new era mean that he helps create certain financial problems for the community where he settles. New roads are needed, new schools are a necessity, more and better services are required. The certain result is higher taxes.

When taxes go up sharply, the new reader takes a new and increased interest in his community. With all these changes going on, the need for top grade reporting of local government news was never greater. The reader, who is also the voter, must be informed. As needs and costs become important enough, he searches harder for facts to help him decide his future.

The questions of sewer systems, lighting plans, new schools, zoning, redistricting of school districts, consolidation with other community units, mean that a good reporter of local government news has an important job cut out for him.

The same demands which make this reportorial task so important make it more exacting than ever. James Klockenkemper, Michigan business manager for United Press International, said that today's reporters must be more and more specialized so they can understand the increasingly complicated facts of government, and at the same time possess a more general background than ever before so they can put the facts they find in proper prospective for the reader.

The opportunity for complete news reporting is with us now as much as ever. How well the job is done depends upon the reporter, his skill and the effort he is willing to put forth.

Methods can vary and be improved. Use of color and more photographs can make stories more readable. But the need for courage, initiative, thought and just plain hard work will always be part of the challenge to do a better job.

Perhaps the most important unchanging fact of all concerns the relationship between a well informed public and a free public. Unless the citizen is informed so he can reach logical decisions in the voting booth, democracy cannot succeed. This is really the great challenge with which all newspapers worthy of the name must deal.

Walter Williams, Dean of the School of Journalism, University of Missouri from 1908 to 1935 wrote what is known as "The Journalist's Creed." It serves as a guide for many reporters, and is accepted as the

ideal aim of a dedicated newspaper person. He wrote:

> I believe in the profession of journalism.
>
> I believe that the public journal is a public trust; that all connected with it are, to the full measure of their responsibility, trustees for the public; that acceptance of a lesser service than the public service is betrayal of this trust.
>
> I believe that clear thinking and clear statement, accuracy, and fairness, are fundamental to good journalism.
>
> I believe that a journalist should write only what he holds in his heart to be true.
>
> I believe that suppression of the news, for any consideration other than the welfare of society, is indefensible.
>
> I believe that no one should write as a journalist what he would not say as a gentlemen; that bribery by one's own pocketbook is as much to be avoided as bribery by the pocketbook of another; that individual responsibility may not be escaped by pleading another's instructions or another's dividends.
>
> I believe that advertising, news and editorial columns should alike serve the best interests of readers; that a single standard of helpful truth and cleanness should prevail for all; that the supreme test of good journalism is the measure of its public service.
>
> I believe that the journalism which succeeds best--and best deserves success--fears God and honors man; is stoutly independent, unmoved by pride of opinion or greed of power, constructive, tolerant but never careless, self-controlled, patient, always respectful of its readers but always unafraid, is quickly indignant at injustice; is unswayed by the appeal of privilege or the clamor of the mob; seeks to give every man a chance, and, as far as law and honest wage and recognition of human brotherhood can make it so, an equal chance; is profoundly patriotic while sincerely promoting international good will and cementing workd-comradeship; is a journalism of humanity, of and for today's world.

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