# **CHAPTER TWENTY**

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Lawrence J. Haas

## **MEDIA**

#### By Lawrence J. Haas

Two centuries ago, philosopher Edmund Burke labeled the media "the fourth estate," one that jockeyed for influence with the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners of France after the revolution. The term took root in America, nourishing an image of media power that you would be wise to take seriously.

The media are here to stay, and they will be a big part of your professional life. You can't wish them away. Nor should you try to work around them, for that's a strategy doomed to failure. They are too powerful, with too many ways to shape public opinion to your detriment. As Mark Twain said, "Never pick a fight with someone who buys his ink by the barrel."

Instead, you need to: (1) understand who they are and what they require, and (2) hire the right people and create the right process for interacting with them.

## **Understanding the Media**

With the information revolution of recent years, media come in greater variety than ever. They are newspaper, magazine, and wire reporters, columnists, and editorial writers; TV and radio anchors and producers; and online reporters and bloggers. They reach different audiences, they need different kinds of information, and they face different deadlines.

Your relationship with them will be adversarial—inherently so. They will want to know everything that's happening in your agency, especially the very things you may want to keep out of the public sphere, and they will want to know it before their competitors do. They will look for negative stories, which will more likely get them on page one or on air in a news broadcast.

Stiffing them will not work. That will just anger reporters, who will then go out of their way to portray you negatively. They can always find someone to say something bad about you, whether a congressional aide, a lobbyist, or even a jealous colleague from within the administration.

Instead, you should accept the media as a given and work with them as effectively as possible.

## Working with the Media

Hire the right communications director. You can't be the day-to-day "go to" person for the media; you'll be too busy running your agency. You need a communications director who will be your spokesperson. You need

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someone whom you trust, someone with whom you can work closely to ensure that he or she is disseminating your message. Hire a professional, someone who has done similar work in the past or someone from the media who wants to make a career change—that is, someone who understands how the media work, what they need, how they develop stories, and so on. If possible, find someone who understands the substance of your agency's work. A communications director who can explain your agency's work will garner greater respect from the media and will let you concentrate on your own job.

**Empower your communications director.** Your communications director needs to know as much as possible about what's happening in your agency. Only then can he or she make the right judgment, in consultation with you, about how to accurately portray the agency's business. Allow that person to attend as many of your meetings as possible. Let him or her speak "on the record"—that is, with that person's name and title identified publicly—sending a strong signal to the media that you trust your communications director to speak on your behalf.

**Empower yourself and your top senior staff.** Your communications director can't do it all. You will want to, or have to, speak with the media from time to time. If you have a large agency with many issues, you may need other senior members of your team to do the same. You should rely on the communications director, however, to coordinate all such conversations or e-mail exchanges, ensuring that one person is tracking all media interactions.

Coordinate your communications activities. Neither you nor your communications director will work in a vacuum. Your agency probably sits within a larger department, but even if you run a stand-alone agency, you are part of a new administration. The administration will want to coordinate the timing of news-making announcements by departments and agencies. You and your communications director should keep your counterparts—in the department and, if appropriate, in the White House—apprised of major communications activities that you want to undertake, such as a press conference to launch a new initiative. When it comes to intra-administration coordination, the rule is: no surprises.

**Protect the career staff.** You should *not* expect career staff to speak with the media (except at the direction of, and supervision by, your communications director). They are civil servants; they were hired for their jobs before you arrived and many will still be there after you depart. Although they manage federal programs at your direction, they were not hired to promote the political agenda for any particular administration, including yours. You should not ask them to do so. Instead, you should make clear that when career staff receive calls or e-mails from the media, they should send them to the communications director.

When opportunity knocks, don't be shy. When important issues arise, your communications director may suggest, or the media may demand, that you speak to reporters (one on one or in group settings such as press

conferences). You should be prepared to do so and you should work with your communications director to decide what other top staff should speak as well. Also, you should consider mechanisms of regular communication with key media, such as weekly roundtable discussions, through which you can educate reporters about your work and draw attention to your most important initiatives.

When problems arise, don't be shifty. "Trust is the coin of the realm." Your credibility takes time to establish but a mere moment to destroy. From time to time, things will go wrong. You will make a mistake or one of your staff will break the law or a watchdog group will write critically about one of your programs. In speaking with the media, you will be tempted to shade the truth or hide some information. Don't. Instead, explain what went wrong and what you're doing to prevent it from happening again. Otherwise, the media will likely learn later that you were less than forthright, and they will never trust you again.

**Know the rules.** The media operate under rules that define how they use information. Unless otherwise noted, you must assume that when you speak to the media, you are "on the record," meaning they can identify you and use everything you say. You may, however, want to speak "on background," which generally means they must hide your identity (for example, "an administration official"); on "deep background," which generally means they can use your information but not attribute it to anyone at all; or "off the record," which generally means they can't use the information at all. But because these terms are ambiguous, you should pin down the ground rules with the media *before* you start any conversation with them.

**Set your message.** The best people and the best process can only go so far, however. You need to decide: What do you want to tell the media, and what should your communications director say on your behalf? What are your highest priorities? Your most important initiatives? Only you can answer these questions. It's your agency—and your message.

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