

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEWS ROOM

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Advanced news writing

BY DAVE WEATHERALL

- ▶ Following the Benjamin Netanyahu riots, and coinciding with my first two years writing for the Link, Concordia University's campus was engulfed in Middle Eastern affairs. Both pro-Israeli and pro-Palestinian factions were engaged in a serious game of one-upmanship through speeches, films, presentations and demonstrations. Each side grew louder and louder until few could stand to listen anymore.

I covered as much of it as I could. I covered every Middle Eastern specialist, Palestinian and Israeli, Hillel and the Muslim prayer space. I wrote as much as I could and I became known as the campus Middle Eastern reporter. Both sides seemed to judge me as a pretty fair and balanced reporter who they could trust.

This is what I remember as the basic news writing stage of my campus reporting career. I was gathering and disseminating information, but it wasn't closely guarded information; it was readily available to a public audience. I was assisting in accurately reporting it to a larger audience. Doing this well is the key to quality basic news writing and establishing your credibility, this leads to what constitutes advanced news writing.

In the fall of 2004, heading into my last year at Concordia, I heard rumours that the Jewish student group on campus (Hillel) was attempting to bring another former Israeli prime minister to Concordia. Given what had happened the last time, I felt it was important that if the rumour was true, Concordia's student population deserved to at least know about what was going on behind

closed doors. So I set out trying to find out if the rumor was true.

This is the first step to quality advanced reporting: testing your hypothesis. I already had the credibility and contacts within both groups on campus through my years of basic news reporting, I was able to call on a lot of people to try and retrieve some tidbits of information on the subject. After a few days and a whole lot of nothing (another key to advanced news reporting: patience), one of my sources called me and told me an interesting story. Apparently he'd been stopped in a hallway by a campus security guard who told him that Hillel had submitted a request to the university's administration for permission to bring Ehud Barak (a former Israeli prime minister and general) to campus.

When I asked why they'd relayed that information to my source, he said that security didn't want Barak to come because they didn't want to deal with the violence. He figured that if the news got out, there would be less chance of him being allowed to come.

This is an crucial part of advanced news reporting: judgment. Most good sources of information, like the one I've just detailed, have something to gain from the dissemination of further information. So, what you will often have to assess are the reasons you have for publishing your article.

Are you doing it to try and make a name for yourself? Are you doing it because you believe in the cause of one of your sources? Or (and this is the question you should hopefully be able to answer first) are you doing it because you truly believe it is in the best interest of the public for this information to surface?

Once you've obtained the information you need, you have to decide how to report it. In my case, I didn't want to use an anonymous source in my story because I felt I could coerce one of the university administration lackeys to fess up to the whole process adding weight to the piece.

I called up the university public relations department and got an interview with one of their spokespeople. Then I asked him straight up, 'Where is the administration in its review of Hillel's request to bring Barak to campus?' Instead of trying to seek confirmation that a request had been submitted, the question pre-suppose its existence and forced him to provide an answer that confirmed my source's information.

This is another crucial aspect of advanced reporting: developing and choosing the right question that will get you what you need to construct a solid foundation for your article. If I had made the interview with the university's spokesperson to try and get him to admit there was a request, he may have been inclined to deny it outright in the hopes the issue would go away. But by establishing the parameters of our conversation that I know the request exists, he is forced out of his message plan and into providing real answers to my questions.

At this point, I considered sitting down and writing the article without speaking to Hillel. I'd confirmed the request without talking to them and I had enough background information on Barak to put together a good piece. But in the interest of fairness, knowing that divulging their request would be met with hostility (you'll discover, through advanced reporting, that no one likes



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other people unearthing their secrets), it would be irresponsible to the reader not to present their comments.

Predictably, they refused to comment, then denied everything, then threatened to sue. This convoluted response should be a journalist's first clue that the person they are speaking to is a) lying and b) not someone who will follow through on their idle threats. Having spoken to them, I explained why I thought it was important that Concordia students know about who is being scheduled to speak on their campus (all in a respectful, non-confrontational way), we ended our conversation and I wrote a story that broke the news that Barak was coming.

The article remains one of my proudest and this brings me to my final point about advanced reporting: once it's published, there is an intense feeling of satisfaction because you will have invested time and effort, exercised careful judgment and presented the public with something no one else could have told them.

This is something journalists rarely feel after completing a basic news writing assignment. Sometimes it can materialize after a clever pun, or some particularly well-linked and flowing paragraphs, or a snappy 22-word lede. But that feeling of having unearthed and accurately reported something that people deserve to know usually only comes after a significant time investment from the journalist.

In the end, after everything had surfaced, I ended up befriendng the two Hillel executives who had hurled insults at me. If your publishing intentions are virtuous and true, then in the long run,

the people you are writing about will come to respect you. ◀

Dave Weatherall was CUP's Quebec Bureau Chief from 2003-2005, and National Bureau Chief in 2005-06.

Covering the university administration



BY WILLIAM WOLFE-WYLIE

- ▶ Some reminders before we get started:
 - Before you interview your first source, realize that there is far more going on at your university than you could ever realize. It employs hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals who are all very busy. You haven't the foggiest idea what half of them do.
 - Any member of a university administration that has been in his or her position for more than four years has dealt with your predecessors. We all know that student newspapers experience huge staff turnovers and we all recognize the change of opinion, style, and tone that papers experience every year with that changeover. University administrators rarely realize this. Your predecessors will have set the tone for the interview before you even open your mouth. Know their work, know what you're up against.
 - Your paper's archives are your best friend.
 - Bureaucrats, not necessarily political figures, can often offer you much more than any VP could.
 - You are a beginner journalist. No matter how many articles you've written or how many interviews you've conducted, you are a beginner journalist. You still have a whole lot of screw ups left in you and chances are good that covering the university administration will draw one or two of them out. But always remember: "There are only two kinds of journalists: Bad ones, and ones who are trying to get better."

ONWARD!

University administrations are complex organizations. Many first-year students will refer to any decision made as a decision made by "the university." Such language is often untrue.

It's best to think of a university administration the way you think of an ecosystem: an infinitely interconnected and interdependent grouping of individual organisms (departments/staff members) who work together to ensure smooth operation. But at the same time, universities, just like ecosystems, are dependent upon, and affected by, other ecosystems (governments, other universities, businesses, the price of oil, student demographics, etc.).

So "covering the university administration" is, in fact, a bit of a misnomer. It is impossible to effectively cover a university administration without first understanding the environment in which the university is operating. There is a theory in international relations which states that in any given situation, nations will act similarly to individuals. It makes sense since all nations are run by individuals or a collection thereof.

The university president, members of the board, and vice presidents are all liable to be reactionary to the influences of government, alumni, fundraising initiatives and all the rest of the jazz. Remember this. We cover the environment in which the university administration operates, not just the administration. After all, you wouldn't write a story about the transitional government in Iraq without writing about its American influences, would you?

FINDING STORY IDEAS

It's easier for some than it is for others. Some universities are more transparent with their initiatives than others and some universities have a more accessible/friendly communications department than others. There are some stories which are widely publicized (or at least very noticeable) and no student paper will ever have an excuse for missing them. These include: annual budget announcements, administrative staff changeover, anything involving a press conference.

But there are other stories that could slip under the radar, and thus out of the student consciousness if not for the work of an attentive news editor. Funding arguments, sudden changes in staffing organization, calls for tenders, new partnership initiatives, and campus crime all fall under this category. These are all elements of university life that are often poorly publicized, or purposefully hidden from public view, but are viable news stories. How do you find them?

Make friends with everyone

This doesn't mean cozying up to the president at the annual wine and cheese. What it does mean, though, is going to the people who have the real power in the institution: the director of security and the director of your campus's version of the Computing Services Department. The good thing about these people is that they can put you in the loop of most of the campus affairs without their higher-ups even knowing about it.

Let's start with your friend in Computing Services. All campus email networks are controlled via a central

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server, which is usually behind several locked doors for obvious security reasons. But, as we all know, there are a huge number of mailing lists administered locally on the network manager's computer. These include membership on the `allstudents@yourcampus.ca` email list and the `allstaff@yourcampus.ca` email list (among about a hundred others since there's usually one for each department as well). Get your paper's generic email address added to, at the very least, the staff mailing list. This isn't usually all that complicated since you're recognized media, it's not a student email account, and it only involves a couple of keystrokes to complete.

Once this is done, you have access to much more information than ever before: advanced notice of meetings of the faculty association, calls for applications and notices of interviews for Deanships, notices of deaths in the university, resignations, and all that fun newsworthy jazz.

Your next stop is the director of campus security. Most campus security people have to write weekly reports for their superiors outlining every time they were called, what it was for, and what their response was. Most of them also feel fairly underappreciated and are open to getting more credit for their work (i.e. cc-ing you or your paper on the weekly crime report email).

The list doesn't stop there. The university budget manager can send you copies of previous drafts of the school's budget so you can see how the arguments progressed on paper. The head of the faculty association can feed you gossip until your ears are bleeding and give you copies of contracts and past press releases. Most universities collect sta-

tistics about student registration and faculty activity — find out who keeps these records, too.

Boards of Governors are notoriously difficult to cover. The reasons for this are usually pretty simple: they're important (read: busy) and only on campus four times each year in poorly publicized meetings. Most student unions have a Board of Governors representative who should be doing their best to publicize meetings. If they're not worth their weight in coal, though, you have an even bigger problem. This is where your personality serves you well. Get them to let you photocopy their copy of the agenda (or ask the Board's Secretary, the kind with a capital "S," for it). Know when and where the meetings are held, and show up to every single one. Eventually Governors will get to know your face.

Don't rely on the agenda (if you get it) or the students' union (if you don't) to decide what meetings to attend. Universities don't hide information by keeping it secret, they do it by making it deathly boring. As a result, most good story ideas come not from the predictable brawl at a Senate or BoG meeting, but from digging around in that blandly-named report.

•[See: Ch 4. Research]

But this is pretty standard reporting — the juiciest material comes from just keeping your ears open. Professors are notorious for alluding to budgetary procedures, union woes, and other such material in the classroom. Students gripe and moan all the time and chances are good that if one student is complaining, many are upset.

Generally speaking there is one person on campus who is the campus busybody. The person who knows way more than they conceivably should about everything relating to the university. Sometimes they're weird conspiracy theorists but other times they're just people who have been at the university way too long. Make friends with them (at least on a professional level). Often, they'll have an allegiance in one office or the other but this isn't a problem so long as you realize that this allegiance will slant whatever information they give you. As always, double check any scoops they offer against other sources or documents.

So how do we find stories? By amassing as much information as we can: documents, emails, schedules, insiders who are sympathetic to your work (these can take a few years to develop) and, the best kind, random people stopping you in the street and telling you about something (don't count on it too much).

But wait! Scandal has broken! The university is about to shut down one of two computer labs without any student consultation, the union is blind, meetings were behind closed doors, students are pissed as hell and it's all up to you to tell them what's going on!!! Whatever shall you do? Which takes us to part two . . .

IDENTIFYING THE STORY

You have the idea, you know where the problem is, but what's the story?

How you choose to tell the story will determine everyone's first impressions of the issue and that's a powerful role — especially if, as the student newspaper,

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you're the only one reporting on the story. That's why follow-ups are important: while interviewing the vice-president, find out where the money from closing that computer lab is going to go — maybe it's a good cause which could result in an interesting spin-off story.

Finding the story in a story idea about the university administration is hard — mostly because we don't fully understand all of the wheels in the machine that came together to put this story on our desks.

When interviewing for a story about the administration (and we'll come back to this when we talk about sources), your very first question should be “how did all this come about?” That will (hopefully) lead your subject into a half-hour spiel involving committees and departments and tenders and contracts and budgets and about a million other things that you only have a basic understanding of.

Don't worry if you're sitting with your pen scribbling material that you don't understand. There will be time to understand later — just don't stop writing. This kind of rant also dictates any number of follow-up questions: who are the stakeholders? Were they present at any of the meetings? Which voices were heard? Which voices were considered? Get in touch with any of the individuals mentioned and see what they think about how the procedures went.

Follow-up questions should also seek to expand your understanding of the issue. Never walk out of an office more confused than when you entered. If your article is going to explain both sides of a controversy to 10,000 students, then you had better understand both sides

of the argument.

Things to look for: Who has the most to gain/lose from this? Student journalists are notorious for covering an administrative issue from the administration's standpoint because they are less likely to be accused of bias. Finding the story is almost never about how the decision was made, but about who is affected by the decision.

Nobody writes about the Terry Fox Run with a lede that reads like an Annual General Report — “The committee first met to consider the possibility of establishing an annual half-marathon in Terry's honour in . . .” — it's dull and won't be read even though the event itself is wonderful and inspirational. Get to the heart of the matter: talk about the people.

SOURCES 'R' US

The first thing to understand is where you, and your story, are located in the university ecosystem. Every ecosystem is made up of a number of subgroups such as plants, waterfowl, animals, insects, and so on. So is a university. There's the students' union, student services, financial services, communications, external relations, facilities management, etc. Within each of these are any number of jobs that hundreds of people occupy (species within the ecosystem). And they usually act fairly autonomously. Never expect any department to know what the other is doing in any detail and this is why it is so very wrong to say “the university is launching an initiative.” Name the department or departments involved — very rarely is it the university as a whole.

The fun part about recognizing and using this department compartmentalization is that the number of people available to answer questions just got a lot bigger. No longer are you going to the one person at the top of the ladder. Rather, you're also able to speak to everyone that reports to them.

Documents are sources, too. One of the great things about technology as it relates to journalism is the advent of shared drives. If you've never heard of these before your research life is going to get a whole lot more interesting. Instead of a central filing cabinet next to a photocopier, like in the old days, the server is set up with different password-protected folders that members of the department can access (this includes everyone from the student summer assistants to the super big boss). These drives are accessible from any network point on campus and only require a username and password. Contained within these drives is every single document that more than one member of the office might need to access (in the communications department, for example, this drive could hold scans of the president's signature for press events). How is this useful for you? Getting documents from these is as simple as having a friend in the department emailing you an attachment.

Part of figuring out your sources comes from your initial interviews, and “who would you recommend I speak with?” But the only people that this question will lead you to are those who think that the proposal is great (nobody is going to send you in the direction of the group nay-sayer). So finding the voice of dissent is part of where your job gets fun. Think about it for a bit: who's being affected by the decision? Who's using

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the computer lab regularly? Who has the most to lose or gain from this? If the answer is students, your next stop is the office of the dean of students and/or the SU. If it's the outside community, you're making a meeting with city hall or your region's councilor. If it's faculty, then call the president of the union. You get the idea.

Faculty union meetings, the university Senate and Board of Governors, departmental meet-and-greets, even your classes are full of potential sources.

•[See: Ch 3. Covering meetings, Ch 4. Acquiring more contacts].

It's important to understand the political place of each group — Deans, the Senate, the BoG, etc. — has on campus, but it's unique for each campus. Finding out for yourself is fun, though.

One of the things to remember is the sheer number of people who are employed by the university. The politically visible people (presidents, VPs, deans) might have all the information you want, but so do a lot of other people. Consider a basic, foreseeable story such as the release of the annual university budget. The composition of that committee is made public at the beginning of every year and every member of that committee has an opinion about how the process went down and has copies of all the documents.

NEWSWRITING TIPS FOR COVERING THE ADMIN

Get the documents. In the bureaucracy of the university administration, everything is put on the virtual paper of the computer screen — and if you don't

have a copy of that document, you have a problem. In the name of accuracy you should have copies of anything that your source refers to. If they reference a memo that went around the office, ask for a copy. If it's a union negotiation, get a copy of the current contract. If it's a budget announcement, get a copy of the budget. All of these documents exist on people's computers, it's just a question of hitting "print" or "send." Plus, what looks better on a page "Mr. X said that a memo was passed to him pointing out that . . ." Or "In a memo dated January 14, Mr. X was directed to . . .?"

Be weary of the term "off the record." This is a hotly debated term in all journalist circles. Anyone who has made it to the top of a university ladder has had to deal with media before and has their own interpretation of what "off the record" means. If the words come out of their mouth, make sure you're both on the same page as to its definition.

In short, speak to everyone you think might have something to contribute. The university is a very small place, geographically as well as in the rumor mills; walk to your source's office.

Email is the devil. Never ever use email. It is easy to ignore, pretend it never arrived, or respond with a single, useless, sentence. Nothing is worse than waiting for someone to respond to your email and, when they do, it only says "I'm happy with the decision that was made." Don't let it happen to you.

A NOTE REGARDING STUDENT UNIONS

Student unions change about as often as student newspaper staff. And, like

student newspapers, the tone of the union changes annually with them. Some years the union seems to be in bed with the administration and arguing for higher tuition fees. Other years the union seems to be staffed entirely by leftist radicals who think sandbagging the SUB is a grand idea. Likewise, your coverage of them will change from year to year. Some years, they can reasonably be lumped under the same title as "administration." In other years they are more accurately treated as a separate student organization.

•[See: Covering student unions]

REMARKS RESEMBLING A CONCLUSION

There is really one thing to keep in mind: most people are decent. There are very few real, in-the-flesh, assholes in the world. For this reason, it's usually wise to give the administration the benefit of the doubt until proven otherwise. Writing a scathing, condemning article about something you know little about and researched poorly hurts the reputation of the whole paper and destroys your credibility.

The journalist's biggest fear, nay, phobia, should be of being wrong. Never be wrong. But if you're right and you can prove that you're right — be right in a blaze of fiery glory.

Every now and then, however, one of those rare, real, in-the-flesh bad people actually makes it to the top of the ecosystem . . . ermm . . . I mean, university, and causes shit. That's when it's your turn to take them down. The more stories you write, though, the more often you'll find that when something terrible happens it's very rarely out of mal-

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ice, spite, or evil-doing. Rather it's out of lack of foresight, ignorance, or poor planning. Most of the time your article actually carries the hope of bringing the ship back on course by pointing out where there was a leap in logic. This can be a rewarding thing. ◀

*William Wolfe-Wylie (Argosy) was
CUP70 National Bureau Chief.*



Covering student unions

BY ROSS PRUSAKOWSKI

- ▶ Though many disagree, and even more people try to ignore it, students' unions/associations (SUs) and students' newspapers coexist in a symbiotic relationship. It is impossible to be involved in one of these campus organizations without having to work with, use or cover the other.

That's because the politicians depend on us to get their names and accomplishments out there (every year is an election year on a university campus) while we want them to provide us with stories and scandals that readers can't find anywhere else. However, getting these stories and managing to decipher and explain them to readers can be extremely difficult. Especially when only a handful of elected representatives understand what's going on.

So, what's a hard-working newspaper writer or editor to do? Well, short of giving up or trying to stack the SU with your own people, there are a few other ways of getting the goods. Be warned though, once you've traveled through the looking glass into understanding student politics and politicians, side affects may include the strong urge to draft policy or make campaign posters.

PART I: GETTING INTO THE RACE

Regardless of whether you were born to cover student politics or had the beat thrust upon you there are a handful of basic steps you should take before you attend a single meeting or open an agenda package.

Since education is a provincial responsibility, there are at least 10 different

models for how SUs are set up, run and governed. To begin to understand where they get their powers and what powers are available to them, it's worth reading/searching through the provincial legislation regarding the creation and structure of post-secondary institutions in your province (easily found by Googling "Queens Printers" and then searching on those sites).

While the legislation might be an exceedingly dry read, it can hold important information — like if SUs need to hold annual general meetings where membership must approve certain items, or if SUs are exempt from some legislation. This information is crucial for anyone covering student politicians because, in many cases, the politicians haven't read it themselves and will contravene the legislation, an action you can turn into a good story simply because you know more than they do.

The provincial legislation shouldn't be the end of your reading though. Students' unions are awash in bylaws, policies, Robert's Rules, standing orders and constitutional sections that govern their operation. Get a hold of these documents and become familiar with them. If you aren't, then a council or committee meeting can be painfully boring and confusing when councilors start throwing around acronyms or ask to challenge the chair.

However, if you're not fully prepared to cavort with student representatives there are a wealth of other sources you can tap. Looking through your paper's recent archives or the SU's meeting minutes to see what previously made headlines is extremely useful. Not only can they provide context to the discussions your SU is having now, but they

can also be great sources for follow-up stories to see if anyone followed through on previous promises/motions.

And, of course, don't forget the more obvious things to look for: ensure you're getting meeting agendas in advance and read them; go over all motions with a fine-toothed comb; read their press releases and the propoganda on their website, and don't underestimate how much you can learn from the SU budget.

Being familiar with the policies, procedures and structure of your Students' Union is the foundation to covering them effectively. Once you've laid it, then you're ready for the experience of SU meetings and can start putting pen to paper (or keystroke to Word document).

PART II: COVERING

Student politicians are often just as dedicated to their form of campus involvement as you are and think what they are doing is extremely important. Though you may disagree with their ideas completely, being a passive sounding board will get you a lot further than loudly decrying their beliefs.

It is extremely important that you be civil and even friendly with the representatives and employees of your SU because they are the ones who will give you the gossip and heads-up about things going on that you might not hear about otherwise.

Not only should you have (some) respect for what they do, but also people must become familiar and comfortable with who is covering the SU. This



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means that having a core group of reporters or people covering the SU and attending all of their meetings is extremely important. Once councilors get used to someone from the paper being as much a part of council as they are, they will speak a little more freely in the meeting and they'll probably engage in small talk. This is where the game really begins and where the most useful information comes from.

Most students' unions are members of a national or provincial lobbying organization, like CASA or CFS (or dozens of regional groups). The 2004-6 and 2006-8 national chairs of the CFS (and 2005-06 BC director for CASA) all independently pointed out the similarities between these groups and CUP: people who are really interested in SU stuff will often stick it out for another few years in the national office. So, covering provincial or national groups is just the same as covering the SU down the hall except the stakes are a little higher.

It's also marginally more difficult to get information on these groups, as their websites contain little more than contact info and press releases, and their bylaws aren't always open to non-members. Meet in person with all provincial reps, and the national ones if you can (useful if your SU is being recruited).

PART III: INFORMATION GEMS

Much like moths are drawn to a flame, once student politicians find out that you're from the paper you'll likely be engaging in plenty of small talk.

There is plenty of value in these conversations, as long as you play the game correctly— and when it comes to stu-

dent politics, you are playing a game, and it's one that is replicated in the "real" political realm everyday. When it comes to finding out good information in a timely matter, it's all about having a good network of sources.

So, when SU politicians approach you, it's pretty important to talk with them. It's also important to clearly establish when you're "working" and "socializing." But you should never turn your memory off. By letting them know that you're off the record unless you've got your tape recorder out, people will tell you all sorts of interesting things.

Most of what they tell you will be useless information that you can't approach the paper with (who's sleeping with/cheating on/dating whom), but every so often someone will pass along something interesting. This nugget is only a starting point for a story though.

Always ask around and let on that you know something about X to get other people to give you more information. Never get too excited if only one person tells you something because SU information can be a lot like high school information and change with each telling. Keep digging and talking and eventually you'll be able to put together a story.

It can often take many meetings or months until student politicians are comfortable enough to give you something good, but if you stick off the record with them for the one time they do, they'll become a pipeline of information.

Remember though, while some SU politicians will talk with you just because they're friendly many of them might be

hoping to use you to get their name or ideas out. Every year is an election year on campus and some of them will — for reasons of ego, ideology or hopes of getting future favours — pass along info in hope of positive coverage.

Because of the way you only get tantalizing whiffs of the true story when participating in the SU sewing circle, these are usually the stories the executive would rather you not find out about. Stick with it though and you'll often stumble onto some important stories. SU folk like to gossip even more than the newspaper people do.

Other good ways and tips about getting information from councilors include:

- Collect instant messenger addresses of SU officials and elected representatives. MSN is a good way to stay in touch and people lose their inhibitions on the internet. Collecting facebook accounts, email addresses, blog addresses and phone numbers is also a good idea.
- People that sit on a lot of committees are good people to be friendly with. Chances are they'll be the ones able to tell you if a scandal is coming long before anyone else sees it.
- Pay attention to who speaks for and against motions. When it comes time to get quotes for stories knowing who to ask is a lot easier after you've had your ear to the ground.
- Being friendly with the Chief Returning (Electoral) Officer and Speaker/Chair of council is important too since they can provide leads on stories as well (and they're supposed to be non-partisan).



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PART IV: COVERING THEM

When it comes to actually writing about SUs it's good to keep in mind something that another colleague has written elsewhere in this style guide, students' unions don't hide information by keeping it secret, they do it by making it deathly boring.

So, when it comes to covering them, the standard single-issue news story (ie: SU budget surplus; Pigs fly) is only so effective and don't allow students to keep their fingers on the pulse of their SU.

One of the best ways to keep up the coverage about your SU is by compiling a council forum/notes article to run after every meeting. There is always enough

going on at each meeting to fill a 300-600-word column with point forms or short notes.

Reports from the executive, council committees and debates on council legislation are great sources of information for this kind of article and provide a different perspective for readers about what happened at the meeting and how it effects them.

Also, since it's a "notes" style article rather than a single-issue story the style can be a little freer, use more humor and only quote when really necessary. An added bonus is that it helps councilors get used to seeing their names and actions in print — and you as the go-to newspaper person.

While running a council notes article is a great way to cover meetings that are often to unwieldy or unimportant to warrant a full article, they shouldn't replace the single-issue type of story. Once in a while the council will receive a presentation or have an item of business that is too important to be compacted into a section of the "notes". Don't shy away from writing a full article on these things while quoting parts of the debate or chasing down SU councilors during breaks in the meetings. While it might be difficult to differentiate what deserves a full story, what can just be put in a notes column and what can just be ignored, with experience you'll be able to sort things out.

Every campus is different and with the high turnover in newspaper staff and elected officials, the longer you've been covering SU, the more respect and information you are afforded. Be warned though, stay around too long and you're liable to run for office and then all bets are off. ◀

Ross Prusakowski (Gateway) was chair of the CUP Board of Directors during CUP 69.

Some ideas for student union coverage

Budget committee:

Break down that spending; find points of de-convergence. Don't write another "budget shortfall story": make it a "newspaper discovers embezzlement" story! Don't forget smaller budget lines that are discussed only in council or only in the privacy of the programmer's office — special events cost a lot of money.

The differences between SU actions and what the policies say:

A story you'll only get if you know the policies better than they do. Also works when they claim to disagree with their own propaganda or that of the national lobbying group.

The SU/admin relationship:

Do ideologues of different stripes fare differently in the marble halls? As a corollary, how well do they work with the provincial education minister?

PART V: DÉNOUEMENT

While there is other information that could be written in this space, when it comes to covering SUs a lot of stories are developed because of experience.



Covering corporations

- ▶ Few mainstream reporters have the time or expertise to cover the corporate presence on campus. Colleges and universities are immense institutions and it is impossible for a professional journalist to follow every business appointment made to a school committee, the details of every signed research deal, and the strings attached to every corporate gift that is donated.

That is why student reporters are in an enviable position when it comes to covering the relationship between the private sector and post-secondary institutions. Student writers have two important advantages over their mainstream colleagues: time, and an intimate understanding of what occurs on campus.

As tax-cut crazed and deficit-obsessed governments continue to withdraw public funds from education, corporations are poised to become major players in campus finances and, as a result, campus life. This reality could result in a clash of cultures and priorities between public institutions, pursuing the public interest, and private companies, committed to profits. Below are some tips on how to cover this important issue.

OPEN YOUR EYES

Examples of corporate intrusion are everywhere: zoom ads in washrooms, banner ads on a university library website, exclusive Pepsi machines, renamed classrooms and buildings in honour of a corporate donor.

All these visible markers can easily be turned into stories, and you can take each story in any number of directions. For instance, you may want to do a cul-

ture piece, talking to students and faculty about whether a plethora of corporate logos alters the culture on campus. Find out what the university received in return for allowing a business to advertise on school grounds. Depending on the deal, business contracts are struck with the Facilities and Services Department, the library administration, the Fundraising or Development Office, or even the Student Union. Find out who the money and deals are actually flowing through and what their motivations are.

You can always go to the Public Affairs Office and talk to their informational officers. But be warned, as professional spin-doctors they are helpful — until they think you are working on an unflattering story. In the end, however, their job is to find the answers to your questions. If they say they cannot answer something do not believe them. Chances are they are stonewalling you and usually for a reason. At worst you will get a response that the contract in question is confidential, for proprietary reasons, which is a story in itself.

FIND OUT WHO IS MOONLIGHTING

The crossover between the Ivory Tower and Corporate Canada is on the rise. Some college and university administrators, for example, moonlight as paid corporate directors. In return, many corporate directors and members of right-wing think-tanks also moonlight as college or university governors or members of faculty advisory boards.

Check them out with online directories of directors like the one run by Owens Media ([\[tory.cfm?page=1\]\(http://tory.cfm?page=1\)\). Resources like these will tell you that the chancellor of Mount Allison University, John Bragg is:](http://www.owen-media.com/direc-</p>
</div>
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John L. Bragg
Gender: Male
Primary Business:
Oxford Frozen Foods Limited
4881 Main St
PO Box 220
Oxford NS B0M 1P0
Canada

Current Positions:
Oxford Frozen Foods Limited, chr. & pres. & co-CEO
Canada Bread Company, Limited, dir.
Empire Company Limited, dir.
Sobeys Inc., dir.
The Toronto-Dominion Bank, dir.

Associations:
Officer of the Order of Canada/Officier de l'Ordre du Canada - O.C.

Education:
Mount Allison U. - B.Comm.
Mount Allison U. - B.Ed.

Why bother uncovering this cross-over on your campus? The interests of public educational institutions are often at odds with the interests of large corporations. For instance, while post-secondary institutions clamour for more public funding, corporations often want to see less government spending, and its corollary, privatization. The best way to underscore this glaring contradiction is to figure out who is sitting on both sides of the fence and which side they're fighting on (it's not always the same side they sit on).

So collect the resumes of senior administrators, university/college presidents and vice-presidents. If it only



2 Covering corporations

lists academic achievements, asks their assistants outright if they sit on any corporate boards or advisory bodies to any think tanks. You can also turn to Canada's Who Who — a reference book available in all libraries — in which the country's movers and shakers, including academics and college administrators, are profiled.

Also get the list of governors and members of fundraising and faculty advisory boards. This is available from the University or College Secretariat, or its equivalent, and faculty Dean's offices. Some may even have a brief bio. If they do not have a bio, turn to Canada Who's Who. There is also a who's who-type directory for CEOs and other corporate directors: librarians will know about this reference book as well.

Once you have gathered this information ask yourself if any of these people's activities in the private sector undermine their public-sector work. To use an example, the University of Toronto exploded with controversy when it was revealed that the school president was also a director at Imasco, parent company of Imperial Tobacco, Canada's largest cigarette company. Member of the Faculty of Medicine and the university's own Tobacco Reduction Program weren't thrilled, to say the least.

In the case of a corporate person crossing over to the public sector, you can take it a few steps further. Through the company website, track down their speeches. Some might touch on matters of public policy, tax cuts or privatization. In other words, find out if they are peddling an anti-public education agenda. If you have bankers moonlighting on your campus, find out the extent to which their bank is involved

in student borrowing, either through public loans programs or private student loans. This one has become an increasingly controversial story in the United States.

As a case in point, while Hong Kong Bank of Canada executive David Bond served as chair of the Board of Governors at Simon Fraser University in the mid-1990s, he regularly spouted his privatization agenda in the press. (see Bond's June 5, 1999 column in the Vancouver Sun titled "Sell Public Sector and Lower Taxes Will Result." In the piece, Bond calls schools one of many possible "revenue-generating facilities.") This situation raised the following question: should people who facilitate the dismantling of public education be the stewards of Canada's public colleges and universities?

DISCOVER CORPORATE DEALS

Sometimes, the place to find out about any deals or corporate donations is through the university's own publications. Each campus has one, and is usually weekly or monthly. It is always framed as a good news announcement: a donation here and a research grant there. On some campuses, the Development Office in charge of fundraising produces its own newsletter, announcing the latest gift. But behind all this cheer are research contracts and sometimes donor agreements that spell out what the donors are buying for their generosity.

In addition to tracking the administrative publications, make sure you attend and comb through the minutes of the various committees of Senate and Board of Governors. Many student

papers make the mistake of bypassing these governing bodies and zero in on student union business instead. Avoid this trap, because these non-student council bodies make critical academic and business decisions.

First, call up the Office of Secretary of Senate and Board of Governors, or their equivalents, and get an agenda for all committee and board meetings — they are always scheduled at least one year in advance. Then request that your paper be placed on the mailing list. Each meeting will have a corresponding package, full of reports and motions. A lot of the material will be dry, but there will also be some gems, like the mention of a controversial donation or business deal, that warrant a more careful look.

Faculties of Engineering also warrant careful attention, since they are often closely linked with industry. For example, Greg Bond, a former professor of software of engineering, left the University of British Columbia in 1998 to take a job in New York. In an opinions piece for the Globe and Mail (Aug. 9, 1999), he wrote, "I found that much of my time [at UBC] was devoted to introducing myself to companies, finding areas of mutual interest and attempting to convince them to give me funding to support my research. It was akin to being an entrepreneur raising venture capital — a job I am not skilled at, and one that UBC does not train its professors for."

In other words, professors of applied sciences across the country are being forced to cut deals with business-savvy industries to undertake research projects. You can bet many research contracts include favourable perks for industry. Find out what they are. Unfortu-



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nately, research contracts, unlike donor agreements, are considered a business transaction, and are usually kept confidential. But there are a few ways around this.

BECOME AN ACCESS TO INFORMATION PEST

As public institutions, most colleges and universities are subject to Access to Information legislation. In New Brunswick, though, universities are not covered by the legislation and Ontario is a notable exception, where individual institutions draw up their own access to information policy.

Through an ATI request, you have the right to the most seemingly trivial information — e.g. how much your president spent on their recent fundraising trip to Asia — to the very relevant, like a donor agreement or research contract. You receive the forms from the Public Affairs Office or the department that handles ATI requests. This is one of the best, but most underused, tools at your disposal.

The best case scenario? The college/university hands over a donor agreement that shows academic freedom is being compromised. A warning, however, do not be fooled if the deal states that academic freedom is being protected. Get an expert to read the agreement if you are suspicious of particular clauses.

The Canadian Association of University Teachers, the national affiliate of faculty associations, has many experts on campuses to review any agreements or contracts you get your hands on. As custodians of academic freedom, they

will not pass up a chance to review any deals. They are a good resource to call on issues.

If the institution turns down your access to information request, write a story about it. It is very embarrassing for an administration to have to explain why it won't release information to the public about a public institution. As well, if you write a story about an ATI request being turned down, the administration will think twice about denying your next request. You can also appeal if your request is denied. This process varies from province to province, but the Public Affairs Office will outline the appeals process for you.

SEEK OUT THE WHISTLE BLOWERS

There are many Nancy Olivieris out there. (Dr. Olivieri was the University of Toronto professor who, in 1998, blew the whistle on Apotex, the corporation that was funding her clinical trials). As former UBC professor Greg Bond implied in his *Globe and Mail* piece, graduate students and professors can sign deals with industry that contain clauses which they learn later they cannot live with.

It is just a matter of finding these scholars. One way to discover these whistle blowers is to post a house ad in your paper calling on researchers who find themselves in an ethical pickle over an industry contract to contact your paper. This will also make your administration and their friends in industry a little nervous.

Industry and higher education have never been closer, but we can at least clear

the fog of their relationship through strong responsible reporting. ◀

With files from Sarah Schmidt



Covering meetings

BY CLIVE THOMPSON

- ▶ The first thing to understand in covering meetings is why you want to attend the meeting.

There are a lot of good reasons for covering meetings, whether they are meetings of university administration or Queer Nation strategy planning sessions. There are also plenty of times when you shouldn't bother.

The main reason to cover meetings is that the great majority of what happens in the public sector and in business is decided during dry-as-dust committee meetings. Decision-making processes, particularly at universities, are intensely bureaucratic. The language of bureaucracy is one you eventually have to learn simply in order to understand what's going on.

Once you get past the procedural jargon, what goes on during dry-as-dust committee meetings can be very interesting. Universities and companies have long realized that the best way to keep nasty things out of the news is not by hiding them, but by making them so boring that no one pays attention.

For example, I was once flipping through the agenda of a U of T administrative meeting when I noticed an item called "The Interim Report of the Committee to Review Students." It didn't seem particularly heart-stopping at the time, but I attended the meeting and this report turned out to be evidence of U of T's foot-dragging on setting up First Nations student services. An interesting story resulted.

A lot of meetings get covered because the editors are depressingly lazy and

unimaginative; rather than hunt down interesting leads and stories, they cover regular administrative meetings where nothing interesting happens. No campus is so devoid of news that this should be allowed.

The ground rule is that you should never bother to attend a meeting unless it's for a distinct purpose. Very rarely should you attend a meeting without having a sweet clue of what's being discussed or why you're there. Often that purpose is defined by the type of meeting in question.

SPECIES OF MEETINGS

Meetings tend to fall into a few basic categories, and you can expect specific things out of each category: sometimes a story, sometimes only background information, sometimes new contacts. Here are some handy ways to label meetings:

Discursive/Explanatory

In these meetings, issues often get debated without any specific action being decided upon. As a result, they're good to cover for background information on a topic or new contacts, but not to get a story.

Discursive meetings sometimes generate quotes or incidents that you can later use when the issue has developed enough that a story can be written. I was once writing a feature on AIDS research and attended a fairly dull day-long meeting of AIDS activists and physician researchers; the conference certainly wasn't interesting enough to make a story on its own, but during a few discussions several physicians blew their lids and gave vivid quotes I used

later in a larger feature.

Decision-making

These meetings are good to cover as news stories only if the issue at hand is important or fast-developing, such as negotiation meetings during a strike, or maybe the final passing of a human rights policy at your university. Even when this is true, you should still only devote a story to the meeting if something concrete happens. Other than that, these meetings are still useful for getting background and contacts.

Emergency

Emergency meetings are usually called to deal with some real or perceived crisis. In the case of real crises, they can be very interesting; in the case of perceived crises, they can be very hilarious. If the "crisis" is important enough to warrant a story, you should make sure the issue is the focus of the story rather than the events of the meeting. People will want to know that your African Students' Association is launching a massive divestment campaign, but they do not want to read a transcript of the meeting where this was decided.

Run-of-the-mill

This (appropriately) disparaging phrase refers to the regular (say, weekly) meetings of any constituted group, like a university board or your local Public Interest Research Group. These are generally boring to attend, since most of what is discussed is trivial to the point of madness. You'll almost never get a story out of these meetings, but unless you have agendas in advance, you can't know whether it's important without at least dropping by.

By regularly attending them, you'll occasionally pick up on a wayward piece



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of juicy information or scandal that would otherwise never leave the committee room. You'll also gain the confidence of organization members who can't believe anyone would be so crazy as to attend every meeting of their group, and this confidence is useful when the group becomes embroiled in serious news.

PREPARE YE THE WAY

If you've decided it's worthwhile covering a meeting, do your homework. Preparation makes the difference between going to a meeting and being bored out of your mind and going to a meeting and coming out with useful information.

The type of preparation depends on the type of meeting you're attending, but some general rules apply:

- Read any material sent out by the committee/group in advance of the meeting. Reading the agenda and background material will probably subject you to tons of useless crap, but again, only by wading through it all will you discover the one or two things worth reporting on — otherwise these nuggets may slip by unnoticed during the meeting. Make sure you or your editors are on the committee's mailing list.
- Research any of the main topics being discussed in the usual news way: old articles, library material, and talk to people who have covered the issues before.
- Talk to people who are on the committee/group/lynch mob you're attending to get an insider's opinion on what issues will be big. This is a valuable exer-

cise, because you won't often be able to realize which issues will be significant in a meeting just by reading the agenda. (As an example, one meeting I attended included — according to the agenda — a discussion on U of T's proposed "Academic Code of Behaviour." I originally thought it'd be a ho-hum discussion of fines and knuckle-rapping over plagiarism. But about two days before the meeting, a board member pointed out that the proposed code could be used to expel student protestors.)

- When you're talking to the committee or group members, if you've found an angle that would be newsworthy if discussed at the meeting, ask the person if they're going to bring it up. Since you're not a committee/group member, you often won't be able to ask questions at the meeting, so you have to convince someone on the inside to do it for you.
- Try to get photos of people who are on the committee before you attend the meeting. This is particularly useful if you're new to a situation and can't recognize the main players — it'll save you time rushing around after the meeting, trying to figure out who said what.

AT THE MEETING

Bring a pad of paper. If you suspect something explosive's going to happen, take a tape recorder, because you probably won't be able to get the people after the meeting if your deadline is tight. Take a photographer, because a meeting is a good place to get head shots of people. In high-emotion situations, you can even get action shots.

Take all the preparatory material with you, maybe highlighted, including

background information and agendas. People often cite obscure clauses in documents that are handed out with the agenda — "and here I refer, of course, to subsection 5-A of Document A-73, paragraph seven." You've got to be able to follow what's going on.

Arrive early and check out where people are sitting. I often draw a sketch of who's sitting where, which makes it easier to keep track of the action and quoting when rapid-fire insult exchanges heat up. You can even number off the speakers for ease of note taking, referring to your sketch later to see what you meant to say when you wrote "I'll see you in hell before I sign — five to three."

Sit next to someone who knows who everyone is on the committee, because a lot of people may speak whom you don't know. This person can help you identify who's who, and whisper explanations of the more obscure background. Ideally, sit next to your contact person in the group, unless the person you know has been leaking confidential information to you and you want to keep the relationship quiet.

Stories about meetings usually are not like ordinary news stories, where you scribble down literally everything said. If it's just an explanatory meeting, you may want to just sit, listen and absorb as much as you can. Comprehension is easier when you're not taking notes. Write down major info and impressions right afterwards. However, if you're expected to get a story out of the meeting, take notes like crazy.

In cases where a group is protesting the meeting, it's useful to take along another reporter. One can report on what



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happens outside at the protest, the other can record the reactions of the people inside the meeting. Often committee people will freak out and scream abuse about the protesters.

For governing bodies and other regular meetings, examine the libel laws carefully — you could be covered under some privileges. When playing with libel, though, imagine yourself as a toddler with a meat cleaver — tread very softly.

PEOPLE WATCHING

Attending a meeting is kind of like being at the zoo, with political overtones. Watching the reactions of people involved in the meeting can provide as much information as listening to what they say. If someone frowns, laughs, or looks depressed and cynical during important discussions, you get a handle on their opinions. Once you know something about them, your questions will be more relevant if you interview them after the meeting.

Sometimes the reactions of people, particularly administrators, can be a story in itself. For example, I once attended a university meeting where the African and Caribbean Students' Association made a presentation on the university's lack of anti-racism initiatives. The mood was chilly, with practically every administrator looking bored or chatting during the presentation. I included these details in the story because they told a great deal about the university's attitude towards the group.

AFTERMATH

If you find something you're going to write about — or even do more research on — talk to the relevant players immediately after the meeting. Hard-to-reach people often mill around in the few minutes of dead time after a meeting. This could be the only chance you'll get before deadline.

Keep in mind that meetings don't end in the meeting room; they carry on into the hallways and parking lots. Listen in on conversations. You can hear the most incredible news items, particularly if people don't realize you're from the press. Once outside the "official" setting of the meeting, people will often let their true opinions show.

Be careful here, though. Any privilege that you were protected under in the meeting is gone as soon as it's over. Your libel radar has to be in high gear in this charged environment.

WRITING THE STORY

Always focus on the issue at hand, rather than the structure of the meeting. Don't write a game report (Person 1 said A, B and C, then Person 2 said X, Y, Z and Person 3 moved to do M, N, O, P . . .).

Write it as if it were any other news story, focusing on a topic and people's reactions to it. Give equal weight to the information you gathered outside of the meeting, in your research before and interviews afterwards. Write about information, decisions and power struggles. Mention the meeting itself only in relation to what was accomplished and debated in it.

Never get bogged down detailing the procedural nightmares of the meeting. In rare cases, a group's sheer bureaucratic nonsense will be insane enough that it merits a story to show how incompetent a particular body is. Even then, if the story covers the procedural nightmare, it had better be either uproariously funny, or simple enough for an idiot to understand. Preferably, both. ◀

Clive Thompson was the 1991-92 Ontario bureau chief for CUP, and news editor for both The Varsity (1990-91) and The Strand (1989-90) at the University of Toronto.



Covering demonstrations

BY TU THANH HA

► How should student papers cover a demonstration?

Don't. Too often, papers are content to send reporters to a demo so they come back with a lame story that goes: "Hundreds of angry students marched this week to protest . . ."

What follows, of course, are a few predictable quotes from the organizers, mostly activists who have been quoted saying the same things several hundred times before.

If the student reporters are enterprising, they'll try to add some colour and some descriptions in their articles. Except that people tend to do pretty much the same things at a demonstration — they march, they chant slogans, they wave placards, they gather before the office of the baddies and listen to speeches — so the descriptions become rather predictable.

It's preaching to the converted. It's bad journalism. Worst sin of all, it's boring and counterproductive. Instead of showing why things are so bad that hundreds of people are taking to the street, you've limited yourself to quoting the abstract, second-hand point of view of an organizer.

What to do then? You still have to fill some space in your paper. You still want to support the concerns of the demonstrators. But since they rarely come out the day after the demo, student papers should focus on the issue, not the event.

The subject of your story is a demo but the actual theme is something more interesting, more meaningful: anger and injustice. To illustrate that, you have to find personal, human examples.

That's where going to a demo helps. You use it to meet people who have been affected by government or school policies. The march only becomes a background pretext to present case examples. When at a demonstration, your first instinct should be to spot people who look like they don't usually go to a march. Then find out why they went to the trouble of walking five miles on a cold drizzly Saturday.

There are some mandatory steps one has to go through. Like writing down when the march started and when it ended so you know how long it lasted, noting any witty slogans on placards and checking from several sources for crowd esti-

mates (organizers, police, other reporters) and information about any untoward events.

But mostly you want to find time to chat with people so the article isn't just about how many people showed up and what the guest speakers had to say.

Just get to the point: the articles should profile people you find at the demonstration, because most people have interesting personal stories to tell. That's when your article goes beyond the narrow confines of a demo story. Now it is the story of someone's life. Now it is a story of pride, humiliation, anger and injustice and those are raw sentiments that could hope to grab a reader's attention. Combine that with quality research based around the theme of the protest, and you have a real story. ◀



Covering legislatures

► If you are a student reporter covering Parliament Hill or a provincial legislature, never forget these four words: you are a journalist. Yes, it is easy to get intimidated by the flash and glare of the professional press corps. Questioning a politician from the opposition, let alone a cabinet minister, can be down right scary. That is why you cannot, under any circumstance, see yourself as an amateur. If you walk into the lobby of Parliament Hill after Question Period — when it is packed with reporters, cameras and politicians — and think to yourself, “I do not belong here,” you will literally be pushed aside.

Now, do not confuse self-respect with rudeness. It is one thing to fight for your right to question government officials, federal politicians and provincial leaders. Being a jackass, on the other hand, is not acceptable. There are rules in the world of political reporting and every journalist, from senior Globe and Mail writers to CBC correspondents, must follow them. If you break these rules you risk losing your press pass.

The trick, therefore, is to act like a professional reporter. This means knowing

both your rights and responsibilities. It also requires you to learn the special lingo that comes from covering a legislative body, be it the federal parliament in Ottawa or a legislature in a provincial capital.

THE RULES OF POLITICAL REPORTING

Unless a major controversy erupts on campus — e.g. a professor goes on a killing rampage — the day-to-day events at your school will be of interest only to students, or people closely linked to campus. Consequently, many stories published in campus newspapers are not covered by the mainstream press.

When covering campus events, therefore, student reporters do not have to worry too much about competing with other reporters to get the first quote. At worse, a campus writer may have to bump their way through a group of journalism students completing an assignment or a reporter from a competing campus paper.

Student writers covering a legislative

body, however, face a completely different picture. Politicians talk to reporters for one main reason: to get their message out. Student newspapers tend to have a small circulation relative to the dailies. This makes the campus press less attractive to politicians seeking to speak to a large audience. Moreover, a university or college journalist covering national or provincial politics has less experience than professional reporters who cover politics for a living.

As a student reporter in this highly-charged environment you must:

- Convince politicians, government officials and bureaucrats to talk to you.
- Not be intimidated by the power and glare of the mainstream media.
- Be careful that your ego does not get inflated.
- Be careful that your ego does not get crushed.

To accomplish these goals, or avoid making a huge mistake, you must follow certain rules.

Spend your first few days learning how the legislature operates.

Important terms

Scrum

This word is taken from rugby. It refers to a group of reporters gathered around an interview subject, usually a politician. If you want to see a scrum in action turn on the evening news. There is bound to be someone making a statement while being surrounded by journalists.

QP

Short form for Question Period. This is the time of day when the opposition has a chance to question the government. This daily debate lasts roughly 45 minutes. In Ottawa, QP begins at 2:15 Monday-Thursday. On Fridays, QP is held around noon.

Blues

The transcript of question period. A hard copy is usually available one hour after QP has ended. The time when the blues are available, however, may vary depending on the legislative body. Though most reporters use the blues for quotes, they are unofficial documents.

Hansard

Official transcript of parliamentary proceedings. Each morning a hansard is available for the previous days debate.



2 Covering legislatures

The first thing you must do is find out where the press gallery is and who operates it. Once you have done this, then you can inquire about the following:

Where are the press releases posted? How are the press releases filed — on a weekly grid, a general bulletin board, or do you have to ask for them in person? Is there a special room designated for press conferences? Is there a desk, and mail box, available for your use? Is there a contact list for all the MP's, or depending on your province, MPP's or MLA's? Are there phones you can use? Can you make long distance calls if phones are available? Where do the hansards go? Is there a file space? What section inside the legislature is reserved for the press? Can you sit anywhere in this section?

All these questions are vital. Each legislative body has a different system for accommodating journalists. You must learn how your body operates.

Get a feel for scrums and press conferences before you ask a question.

Asking the president of the student council if they wear green underwear is bound to draw laughs across campus. Asking the Federal Finance Minister to get jiggy with the Prime Minister will only make you look like a goof or, even worse, draw a complaint to the Press Gallery that could threaten your press pass.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION

Question Period Format

The government sits to the right of the Speaker. The opposition parties are on the left. The official opposition — the party with the second largest number of seats — opens question period by quizzing the government on the issues of the day. Depending on how many parties are sitting in the legislature you are covering, the order of question period will usually follow this format:

- The Official Opposition opens Question Period by asking a series of questions.
- The third party, who holds the third largest number of seats in the House or legislature, takes over after the official opposition has finished with their designated number of questions. The third party usually asks less questions than the official opposition.
- The fourth party takes over when the third party is finished. Again, the fourth party is likely to have less designated questions than the third party.
- Once all the official parties have questioned the government, a second round of questions may begin if time permits.

Note: only official parties can question the government during question period. Official party status is obtained by acquiring a minimum number of seats. Parliament Hill and each provincial legislature has their own requirement for obtaining official party status. ◀



Managing news campaigns

BY DOUG SAUNDERS

- ▶ A news campaign is a way of turning isolated news events into the stuff of memory.

In a better world than this, where everyone had a say in making decisions and divvying up the rewards, news campaigns would be unnecessary. Newspapers would provide people with information, that information would be relentlessly consumed and people would act with the best information available.

Mass media has developed some clever ways of turning ideas into truth. Most of those techniques have to do with repetition. If you repeat a big enough lie enough times, as the saying goes, it eventually comes true.

One of the easiest ways of preventing true things from coming true is to print them in the paper. Once.

If something important and true happens and you put it in the paper as soon as it happens, but never repeat it, it will fall, as novelist George Orwell said, “down the memory hole.”

If you really want your news stories to resonate in the public mind, you’ll have to find some way to keep them going for more than one issue. That is the essence of a news campaign.

But there’s a second point that should be equally clear. In a sense, you are already engaged in news campaigns. Every paper has a news agenda: a set of decisions about what people and events are important enough to warrant news coverage in that particular publication. Any time you have a developing story or issue that you’re covering regularly,

you’re running a news campaign.

Those decisions may be deliberate and conscious — but they may have just as much to do with journalistic trends and conventions as with the attention-getting power of governments and institutions.

Running a news campaign is a way of setting your agenda at another level. It’s a way of giving your readers a news groove more focused on specific issues, geared to inform them about something specific and perhaps even spur some kind of action.

TURNING NEW INTO NEWS

It isn’t that hard to extend a news item over several issues. A certain amount of advance planning and a well-developed sense of priorities are all it takes. Those are skills every news writer and editor should cultivate anyway. Those skills will turn a reactive, externally-driven news section into an active, staff-driven one.

Some stories can be divided by time. You probably recognize this from, for example, union negotiations or election campaigns. In each issue you print the latest developments in an ongoing story — new controversies, new events, new participants and new analysis of developments.

With some news, you have to force this a little bit. Some weeks there won’t be any major breakthroughs, and you’ll have to resort to a ‘said’ story: “Union leader Polly Pickets said yesterday that the university is deliberately holding back on its final offer. In response, university negotiator Gregory Peccary

called Pickets a ‘whining nobody.’”

A small development like this is then followed by a full explanation of the story so far.

If a story is ongoing, and you’ve decided that it’s important, then it should appear in the paper every issue so it stays alive in readers’ minds. You can almost always find some new development to report on.

Other stories can be divided according to the groups affected. Often major events — budget cuts, new laws, tuition hikes, new technology, for example — will affect several different constituencies in widely different ways.

It’s easy to identify these stories: if you try to write a one-shot story and you can’t help turning it into an 1,800-word behemoth, you probably need to break it up.

For your first story, you could write a simple piece about the development itself, with some key quotes from the people affected, to make the reader aware that there is more to this than meets the eye. In the next issue, you can write a lengthier study of one of the groups affected; and another group in the next issue, and so on. Try to find people who aren’t speaking up, who don’t issue press releases, who aren’t being mentioned by the people in power.

This type of coverage can be exciting because your paper will actually be creating the news. That means they’ll have to act in response to your news, instead of the other way around. A little work along these lines and you may even unleash a flood of stories as actions and counter-actions escalate.



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Be careful of encouraging existing stereotypes and prejudices with the order in which you cover them, though. Running a story about one group on campus two weeks ahead of another group's story could convey the impression that the first group was more worthy of a voice.

Similarly, just because you've planned four weeks worth of coverage along those lines, don't be afraid to deviate from your schedule as new developments arise. Some of your original story ideas might no longer apply four weeks after the original events.

Say, for example, your university is developing a new code of student conduct. You can write an initial piece that describes the new code to the readers. It should contain a few quotes from various proponents and opponents to let people know there are different ways to think about it.

In the next issue, you could cover a speech by the leader of a campus women's group who says the code is good because it allows the university to kick students off campus for sexual offenses.

In the following issue you could run an interview with a member of a black student group who says she doesn't like the code because it could be used by the university to persecute visible minorities. Next to that coverage, however, you could also print reaction from the women's group speaker from the previous week, building on those ideas. While this is happening, you can have a reporter building an in-depth piece on the last time the school changed the code of conduct or comparing it to the codes in place at other schools.

The story builds itself from there and becomes a part of your readers' consciousness.

Other stories can be split by discoveries. This is a way to get maximum impact out of "investigative" pieces.

One week, you can reveal that only 10 per cent of tenured professors on your campus are women. The next week, you can show how this contradicts the university's promotional brochures. The following week, you can show how this breaks a promise the university president made four years ago, and ask him to explain this.

If you've unearthed a pile of shocking facts, it may be best to unravel them gradually, in front of the readers.

Of course, the most intensive news campaigns will feature a combination of these approaches. Using these four strategies, you should be able to find a new angle each week for virtually any story. To put it most crudely, you should find ways to turn your news into a serial drama so your readers will be left hanging, asking themselves "What will happen next?" and rushing to pick up the next issue.

There's nothing wrong with this. If you look at the best news writers, they're simply good storytellers.

CHOOSING YOUR TARGETS

It often seems hard enough to simply deal with the mountains of press releases, minutes, speeches, reports and proposals that pile up in any newsroom. The only kind of planning that happens in these cases is a systematic

response to official voices. Whether the response is critical or complacent, the paper is still following the official agenda.

Breaking out of such patterns really isn't all that tough. Campaign coverage doesn't require any more effort than response coverage, but the results can be much more rewarding.

The main thing it entails is simply thinking about the news this way. If you start dividing news into multiple angles and approaches as soon as you hear of it, rather than assuming that each news item is an open-and-shut one-off story, you'll find news campaigns will come naturally.

TRY A FEW OF THESE APPROACHES

- Bring up news campaigns at regular staff meetings. Get everyone — writers in other sections, editors, production people — talking about the paper's news priorities. Remember, your paper is defined by which stories you run regularly, not the ones you only cover once.
- When selecting news editors, part of the screening could be a question about what news campaigns this candidate might want to conduct during their tenure. This gives you an idea of what the aspiring editor has been thinking about whether or not they understand proactive vs. reactive coverage. It also kick-starts a discussion of upcoming coverage, reminding you to use the summer to plan, for example.
- Hold regular news section meetings, perhaps bi-weekly or monthly,



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and include a regular discussion of campaigns. When launching a new campaign, make sure all the writers show up to brainstorm before prioritizing and grouping them into useful categories. The high-priority items should then be broken into multiple angles and assigned.

- Assign stories as campaigns. There are two ways to do this. Either you can assign a story to a single writer, and give them several angles to examine over several weeks, or you can give the story to several writers and plot out a more intense campaign. The latter approach works well when you've got a crowd of new volunteers.

- Use a beat system. People, or teams of people, on beats will naturally tend to cover stories as campaigns.

•[See: Ch 3. Beat Coordination]

- Go through mainstream news outlets and look for those one-time-only non-truths. Clip them and file them, and watch for patterns. You just may find a campaign in the making.

- See if you can plan a really big campaign — one that lasts all term or all year — well in advance. These can involve news stories, editorials, features, supplements, tie-in stories in the culture, sports or science sections, whatever you can come up with. Create a “working group” of staff members who devote their time to running the campaign. Have them produce a proposal well in advance — it should list story ideas, contacts and resources — so the staff can vote on it.

Big campaigns like this can be a powerful way to reverse weak trends in your

paper's coverage. If you find that the paper hasn't been covering part-time students' issues very well, for example, you could make those concerns into a one-term news campaign. Issues like these can even work themselves into being a regular part of the paper beyond the campaign.

- Finally, if you're really ambitious, you might consider expanding your news campaign beyond the pages of your own paper and work on a common news campaign with other student and alternative papers. This can be done on a regional level, with your own news staff at the focal point, or coordinated even on a national or international scale. You can draw up a timetable of issues and perspectives to cover in advance, or you can agree on rough parameters and let each publication's staff loose at the gate.

However you do it, the advantage of such an approach is that it replicates (albeit in miniature) the force of the mainstream media's consensus news campaigns — campaigns usually conducted in reaction to business or government priorities. ◀

*Doug Saunders was an editor of the *Lexicon and Excalibur* newspapers at York University and a veteran of many failed news campaigns.*



New models in beat co-ordination

BY DOUG SAUNDERS

- ▶ Big daily papers have traditionally kept on top of the news by assigning reporters to semi-permanent beats. The advantages are obvious: reporters come to be known and trusted by their contacts, they can build on the research from earlier stories, they learn to anticipate major events, they learn to tell hot news from hype.

This system hasn't worked too well for even the biggest student papers, though. Even if beats get established for a while, the newsroom invariably drifts back into the familiar patterns of haphazard, potshot coverage.

Why? Because even a very solid and well-organized student paper will only have a handful of reporters with more than a year's experience. These people inevitably feel obliged to cover the "important" stories, wherever they occur. Newer writers learn to pick up the scraps.

Putting each reporter on a personal beat makes sense if you've got a permanent staff of experienced writers. Volunteer-based papers need a system with a stronger focus on the sharing of knowledge and the training of new writers. Such a system should offer more flexibility and teamwork than the beat system, but without the tail-chasing chaos of an unstructured newsroom.

As it happens, some large daily papers have been experimenting with organizational structures much like this. Unfortunately, they've come about more as a panicky response to newsroom layoffs and plummeting circulation than some kind of creative endeavour.

Still, there are some ideas that have evolved in that environment which are well suited to the student press.

This is called the "cluster" system. You don't have to call it that, though. I prefer "teams" or "working groups."

The principle is the same: you have several small groups containing both experienced and inexperienced reporters covering particular "beat" areas. The model shouldn't be taken too literally, since needs and resources will vary from paper to paper, and this system is largely untested in the student press. However, it may stimulate you to consider more effective ways of organizing your writers and your coverage.

CLUSTER BOMBS

This model is an attempt to deal with three observations I've made after two years of running student press newsrooms:

- 1• New volunteers need something important to do as soon as they come in, and somebody reasonably experienced to work with;
- 2• Important stories often get missed because nobody's watching; and
- 3• Story ideas should be developed by watching issues and conflicts, rather than merely reacting to their results.

This is, I hope, a good way to meet all three of these challenges:

New volunteers

At the end of the publishing year, the newspaper staff meets to plan the teams for the coming year. Each team

should contain at least one reporter or editor who has a fair amount of experience writing news.

In September, if the paper's recruitment drive has gone well a constant stream of new volunteers should be coming into the newsroom. They can join coverage teams immediately.

Typically, a new volunteer will be introduced to a news editor, who will give them a package of introductory materials, including a description of the different coverage areas and their teams.

After a day or two of reading the materials and attending introductory seminars, they are asked what team they'd like to join. Then they are introduced to the current (more experienced) members of that team. The older members of the team describe what they've written about in the past, what background files should be read, what contacts will be talk, what meetings and events they'll be attending, and what major conflicts and controversies they will be facing during the coming year.

Then, immediately upon joining a team, they decide what their first story will be and start working on it. The experienced members of the team help the new members research and write their first stories.

The news editors will be freed for more general training, recruitment and coordination duties. Team members will get to know each other, share information and skills, and introduce each other to key contacts and resources.

Full coverage

Each team will have its own schedule of meetings and news conferences to



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cover, its own sources of documents, press releases and studies, and its own network of contacts, flacks, experts and insiders to talk to.

The team members will decide what's important and divide it among themselves so it all gets covered. If things are getting particularly busy, they can give stories to members of other, less active teams. If a sudden, unexpected event occurs, they will be able to respond quickly, with files and phone lists at hand — and have both “on-the-spot coverage” and “background analysis” stories ready for the next issue.

Investigation

As well as responding to “official” events as they happen, the teams will be searching the terrain for richer dirt: the conflicts behind the events, the people affected by them, the people excluded from them, the people profiting from them, the stories they're trying to hide, the things they've done before.

The teams will be setting the agenda instead of receiving it in the mail; knocking on doors instead of answering the phone; making the office jockeys blush with shame instead of flattery. The readers will get the stories they need to hear, not the ones the authorities want them to hear.

NUTS, CLUSTERS AND BOLTS

The way you divide the teams and their beats will depend on a number of factors, including the size of your paper and its staff, your paper's priorities for news coverage, the news campaigns you want to follow, the nature of your school, its students, its surrounding community, and the interests of your writers.

It will be a matter of constant discussion and modification. A news team could emerge from the interests of an individual writer, from the fission of a large, existing news team, or from a news campaign initiative involving the whole staff.

In any case, here's a list of typical news teams and their areas of coverage. No real-life newspaper would ever be satisfied with this specific list, although there are items that should likely be included on any paper's list.

University administration

Watch the president, vice presidents and various other departments at the top of the pyramid. This should include the university board, as well — not just the decisions the board makes but also the identity of its members, their corporations, the things they're up to the rest of the time, the possibility of reforming this all-powerful institution.

•[See: Covering the university administrations]

Academic community

The professors, deans and chairs; their Senate or committees, their endless in-fighting and outfighting, research activity, publications and funding quandaries.

Students' Union

•[See: Covering student unions]

Campus security

On campus and in your community, the cops and robbers game; racism, sexism, heterosexism among law enforcers; what kind of restrictions should there be on campus; what can be done to improve safety.

Beats to keep track of

- Finance and fees
- International students
- Race issues
- Environment
- Curriculum and teaching
- Transportation
- Housing, rent and residences
- Food
- Labour
- City hall
- Provincial government
- Federal government
- Science
- Governance
- Academic freedoms
- Arts
- Sports

Teams can also be issues-based. The easiest way to avoid “university admin” and “students' union” from overlapping on, well, everything is to create teams that deal with specific, important issues — like tuition. Who wants it to increase it, who wants it to decrease it, and what factors will decide?

It's important to maintain a balance: you need at least one team that is mandated to cover the university, but also to ensure balance and depth of issues-based coverage.

I JUST WANNA HEAR A GOOD BEAT

The tricky thing here, as I see it, is to keep this from either freezing up in inflexible inertia or melting down in a bubbling competitive sweat. What it needs is a few meaningful principles.

First off, the dance floor principle: people's teams are going to rub up against



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each other a fair bit, but they shouldn't be elbowing each other in the gut.

Ideally they should be doing something fast and funky together, with mutual consent, of course. For example, imagine the university Senate votes to triple tuition fees, and you've got teams devoted both to "university senate" and to "tuition fees."

This shouldn't create a bench-clearing brawl. People from both teams should get together, share information and divide the story into a couple useful angles so everyone gets involved.

This is always easier said than done, but the idea should be that each team is doing research for all the other teams. A team like "Senate" or "Administration" is probably going to dig up more stories than it can possibly cover. It should give stories to other, related teams.

It's also going to come across information that's useful to other people's coverage. It should retrieve that information and pass it along. This system should be used to increase cooperation, not to turn writers against each other.

Second, the overkill principle: you don't have to create a team to deal with every new target that falls into your scopes. Your setup should be flexible; it should rely on working relations rather than prescribed jurisdictions.

Don't create a beat unless it's going to attract a bunch of people; don't be afraid to kill it if it's not. And don't worry if people are writing stories that don't exactly match the name of their team. This ain't the army.

Last but not least, the reality principle:

realize you're still just a bunch of student journalists trying to fill a few pages with relevant information.

Have regular meetings among the team (one per issue). Get things co-ordinated and on the way, then dig in and enjoy.

But if you're spending more time arguing about organizational structure than you are doing interviews, something is wrong. Perhaps you should scrap the whole thing and try something different.

More likely you should take things somewhat less seriously: "teams" shouldn't be taken to mean NHL. Maybe it is better to call them "clusters," after all . . . even if it does make you think of Chuck Closterman. ◀