

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Media

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MEDIA

By Tom Shoop

Congratulations! You've answered the call to public service and have taken on a leadership role in the federal government. In so doing, you've accepted the challenge of working in one of the least trusted institutions in America, if polls are to be believed.

But here's the good news: Perhaps the only people held in lower esteem these days than government officials are members of the news media. So you've got that going for you.

Serving at or near the top of a federal agency entails dealing with reporters, whether you like it or not. There's a reason why the First Amendment guarantees freedom of the press: Journalists are there to ask questions of government officials on behalf of the people they serve, and to share the answers widely. At their best, they act as the eyes and ears of citizens and inform them about important issues by serving as a reality check on official pronouncements. At their worst, well...

As you take office, you will confront a rapidly evolving media landscape. Once, dealing with reporters was relatively simple: Only a handful of major newspapers cared deeply about government operations, along with a small number of TV network news operations. Many media organizations have now transformed themselves into agile, digital operations that place a premium on eye-catching "content." As a result, the media is more diffuse, more fast-paced, and more ideological. Upstart outlets regularly appear and disappear from the scene, and the President of the United States is as likely to grant an interview with *Vox* or *BuzzFeed* as *The Washington Post* or *Fox News*. On top of that, individual "reporters" unaffiliated with any media outlet can break huge news on social media.

At the same time, news organizations are under intense pressure to run lean operations. Reporters therefore are less likely to have the time to understand how government works than they used to be, and they are more likely to take a cynical view of federal operations.

In short, dealing with the media is a much trickier proposition than in the old days. It requires time, effort, and a tolerance for frustration. With that in mind, here are some pieces of advice for making the most of your relationship with news organizations.

Don't try to ignore the media. More than ever, government executives have their own outlets for telling stories, from official websites to multiple social channels. That makes it tempting to try to cut out the middleman completely. But that almost always backfires. Even small news organizations can command large audiences, and stories—especially those that put government in a bad light—can spread more quickly and widely than ever.

Don't be your own worst enemy. One of the biggest changes in

media-government relations in the past decade is federal agencies' clampdown on communications. Many are reluctant to share any information about their operations—even good news. Something as simple as getting basic information about, or interviews with, federal employees who have won awards for excellent performance can be like pulling teeth. Putting up unnecessary barriers leads to decreased trust and increased cynicism. Especially in this day and age, federal officials should look to spread good news as widely as possible.

Let your experts speak. The best way to get your agency's message out is to let the people who really know their stuff talk about their work. Empower your employees: Give them basic training in dealing with the media, but allow them to speak. Communications should not be the sole province of the public affairs office.

Resist the temptation to hide. When bad news strikes, it's imperative to get your side of the story out quickly and thoroughly. If you don't, reporters will assume you have something to hide. If you simply can't comment on a story because of an agency policy, be direct about it. Don't string reporters along in the hopes they'll give up. They'll just find somebody else to talk about you.

Set the ground rules clearly. Unless a reporter has agreed in advance that what you say is off the record, you are on the record (as well you should be—you're a public official, after all). The definitions of terms like "on background" and "not for attribution" are squishy at best. So before an interview starts, make sure you clarify the terms of the discussion.

If necessary, fight back. By all means, use the communication channels at your disposal to point out when reporters get their facts wrong or simply reach what you believe are erroneous conclusions. Even better, do it with humor and grace. After House Speaker Paul Ryan was on the job for a couple of months, his staff published a funny blog post about the ridiculous number of "first tests" he faced according to news reports that relied on that journalistic cliché.

Play favorites. Journalists don't really like to talk about it, but they recognize that not all reporters are created equal. So while attempting to avoid legitimate inquiries is a bad strategy, it pays to work with those who approach their jobs with professionalism. If you find reporters and organizations that do a good, thorough, fair job, give them the access they deserve. You can choose who to trust.

Finally, remember that reporters are in the B.S. detection business. They only provide value to their readers and viewers when they separate spin from reality. So don't expect them to buy everything you're selling. But do make an effort to work with them. It will pay dividends.

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