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The Simon Review

EXIT ESSAY:
A REFLECTION ON MORE THAN 50 YEARS OF MEDIA COVERAGE IN THE ILLINOIS STATEHOUSE

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Exit Essay: A Reflection on More Than 50 Years of Media Coverage in the Illinois Statehouse

For nearly 40 years, Steve Brown has directed a public relations practice that served clients ranging from Illinois House Speaker Mike Madigan to small, struggling not-for-profits like the Transitional Living Program. He has seen journalism and the media evolve from the days of Royal manual typewriters to 24-hour news channels and smartphones capable of delivering broadcast-quality video in an instant.

Before going into PR, Brown was an award-winning political writer, investigative reporter, and the first full-time Statehouse Bureau chief for the Daily Herald newspapers. He also served as director of intergovernmental affairs for the City of Chicago during Mayor Jane Byrne’s tenure.

In this candid exit interview, Brown details how media coverage at the Illinois Statehouse has changed in the nearly 50 years he spent there, 38 of which he served as press secretary for Speaker of the House Madigan.

Introduction: The Beginning

How does a three-month contract become a 38-year communications project? The ultimate gig economy job?

It was May 1983. Congressman Harold Washington won the Chicago mayoral general election. My then-boss, Mayor Jane M. Byrne, lost. Just days after the inaugural, my resignation was sought and accepted. No ill will. I expressed an offer to help the City Hall administration. It was not needed.
I had learned more about politics, government, and journalism during the previous four years than any collection of college courses could ever hope to provide. No offense is meant to higher education. Textbooks and well-prepared lectures lack the texture of these real-world experiences.

In May 1983, former Illinois House Speaker Michael J. Madigan offered me a three-month consulting contract with the Illinois County Problems Commission. It was one of a bunch of study groups that had sprung up around the Legislature that were about to be exposed as hiding places for cronies and was abolished. Madigan was just a few months into his first stint as speaker. The assignment had few specifics. It paid $2,000 a month and allowed me to maintain a presence in Springfield until I determined my next career step. I did write some news releases, sit in on meetings, and research some bills. My observations tended to focus on how the news media might portray a proposal and how to best make it an easily understandable story.

I had already done eight years at the Daily Herald in various posts including political editor and Statehouse correspondent. Then four more with the City of Chicago helping to organize the first ever Office of Intergovernmental Affairs during the Byrne Administration. Both the newspaper and the city provided some award-winning opportunities. Women in Communications presented the Jacob Scher investigative reporting award to David Mahsman and me for exposing consumer fraud gambits against potential product inventors. It led to some jail time and stiff fines for the scammers. There was also an Inland Daily Press Association award for a scandal involving misuse of state planes.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors named Chicago a recipient of its Most Livable City award. Our office pulled together the entry submission and planned some of the post-award promotional use of the honor.
There needs to be just a mention of the two-time Best Spokesperson honors from the *Capitol Fax* readers’ poll and a share of the credit for the *Illinois Times* “Best Of” win for the doors installed on the first floor of the west wing Statehouse restoration.

No part of my City Hall assignment brought me into contact with the working press then, but I do recall “no commenting” to *Chicago Sun-Times* political editor Basil Talbott in Springfield.

“I can’t believe a former journalist would ever refuse to answer a legitimate question,” said an indignant Talbot. I did not blink. Like most, I found the bluster of Chicago media figures just that. Yelling louder than others never really worked. No amount of media shouting caused me to provide more information.

Once the 1983 spring session ended, I sat with Madigan in the lower level of the Italian Village restaurant in Chicago. He asked about my future career plans. I talked about an interest in a government relations position at United Airlines. He offered to support my effort.

He asked about additional work for Illinois House Democrats. I thought, “Why not pitch in for a few more weeks?”

Those “few more weeks” became more than 38 years of daily contact with the media on behalf of Mike Madigan and House Democrats and as a volunteer spokesman for the Democratic Party of Illinois. The DPI gig gave me a chance to attend seven national conventions for a lifetime total of 10.

Now, more than 38 years later, there have been countless lessons learned and experiences that might be worth sharing for those who find themselves on a similar path.
Spoiler alert: This effort does not thoroughly review the work of press secretary and the four-plus years the Donald Trump Department of Justice led an effort to find actual crimes associated with legislation affecting Exelon or Commonwealth Edison.

One of the seminal works on public relations, Stuart Ewen’s *PR!: A Social History of Spin*, traces the origin of the job to people like Edward J. Bernays and George Creed and President Woodrow Wilson’s U.S. Commission on Public Information just before America’s entry into World War I (Ewen, 1996). Government leaders did not have dedicated staff who worked with the press before that time. It is fascinating to see how the work has evolved over the decades. The work of answering the media’s questions and getting information about all nature of programs, policies and services has become an industry of great size.

In many cases, those who became a press secretary emerged from the reporting ranks, mostly from the newspaper side.

Needless to say, my life travels growing up on the north side of St. Louis to the current position took some interesting, unpredictable, and probably never chartable turns.

**Getting a Foot in the Door**

My own path from high school to college and a professional career was partially a product of my times (with heavy emphasis on Selective Service draft and the Vietnam War). Getting on a career path like mine still requires a young person to make some crucial decisions and to meet some challenges, which my case can help illuminate. My path from a St. Louis Catholic boys’ high school (the now-shuttered Augustinian Academy) to Southern Illinois University is probably different from many families’ experience. I did not do a tour of multiple college campuses. I remember asking an adviser about the journalism program at Northwestern
University’s Medill School of Journalism. The very patient man explained to me the top grades and a pile of cash needed. I had neither.

I found my interest in journalism in part as a process of elimination. Science was scary and math was a nightmare, but writing seemed natural. My curiosity – or general nosiness – led to journalism. The profession seemed like a path with payroll, as opposed to poetry. My high school had a newspaper, but no journalism classes.

To my good fortune, SIU journalism professor Manion Rice led a high school journalism group. It met from time to time (maybe monthly) at the offices of the *St. Louis Globe Democrat*. The sessions were interesting and taught me a lot of basic journalism. It also had some writing contests and scholarships to SIU for the winners. Our paper was called *Tolle Lege*, which is Latin for the command “take up and read” that St. Augustine heard from a mysterious voice during his conversion to Christianity. The paper went from a dinosaur letterpress, which was printed in a generous parent’s shop, to an offset with shorter deadlines, better layouts, and even a little color. Remember: This was 1966.

As a scholarship recipient I never looked for another school even though the journalism program at the University of Missouri had a heralded reputation. Maybe Mizzou was intimidating, too. My decision was also swayed by attending a multiweek summer journalism workshop on the Carbondale campus. Think of it as a mini semester aboard.

My advice to others is relatively simple. Follow a career path with likeable activities. Your tasks at work could become repetitive and maybe boring. Recognize your personal shortcomings. Shaky math and science skills are likely to rule out med school. But always keep an open mind and work hard on the basics.
For example, learn to write well, communicate orally, develop the ability to analyze and
to think critically, develop an interest in some substantive areas – like economics, politics, and
government, or the environment. Learn how to use all the social media platforms. Caution: The
author suggests that once those lessons are learned, social media should be used in small doses
and with the understanding that it is almost impossible to have multiple identities (i.e., Steve the
spox for Public Official X cannot be Steve the raving madman on Twitter advocating for legal
gambling in every square inch of Illinois. Oh wait, it already is. Not radical at all.)

At each step, write and speak in phrases and terms that are heard at home by everyday
people. If the explanation is full of jargon and acronyms, the reader/listener will turn off and
whatever concept being communicated is lost.

It should be noted that the author has had no formal academic public relations education
– all on-the-job training. College was filled with journalism classes and a lot of history (mostly
the Civil War era) and a sprinkling of sociology courses.

My most remembered times at SIU Carbondale were the hours spent at the national
award-winning *Daily Egyptian* newspaper. I started in the back shop of the tar paper shack just
east of the current Paul Simon Public Policy Institute (AKA: the Forestry Building) doing paste
up and layout. I would creep into the newsroom at the end of my paid shift, offer to write a
headline or cutline, maybe catch a ringing phone or just grab someone a Coke. Each step was a
little more interesting than the last.

These were interesting times living at University Park, serving in the housing area student
governing council, and helping to write, edit, print, and distribute a weekly newspaper. Great
friends remain to this day and there is a Facebook page that tracks the modern-day lives of the
University Park Vets Club.
In the spring of 1970, the regular antidraft, anti-Vietnam War protest rallies escalated and took an ugly turn when several students were shot and killed at Kent State University.

Though those shootings occurred nearly 600 miles from Carbondale, the *Daily Egyptian* editors organized a multishift plan with teams of student reporters, photographers, and faculty advisers to cover the SIU rallies, street protests, and other developments. A great deal of details can be found in the pages of Rod Spaw’s excellent book *The Edge of Chaos* (Spaw, 2019-2020). All of Rod’s work is now searchable at SIU’s Morris Library (Spaw, 1966-2020).

There were hundreds of anecdotes, tense confrontations, and ultimately a national Sigma Delta Chi award for best college newspaper reporting. The experience cemented my determination to become a newspaper reporter.

Joining the staff of the Arlington Heights *Daily Herald* after graduation from SIUC and six months of active duty, basic training, and military police school with the Illinois National Guard, I had my wish – sort of.

The excitement of covering campus unrest, a very active student government, events, and regular SIU Board of Trustees meetings was replaced with a beat that included park districts and police departments in Hoffman Estates and Schaumburg – fast-growing suburbs northwest of Chicago without much cop shop news.

Black Friday shopping at the sprawling new Woodfield Mall was an annual Page 1 news event and I was assigned to cover it within days of starting the job. I was awed with the size of the mall, the crowds, and traffic jams. Growing up in the St. Louis suburbs, I was familiar with multidepartment-store shopping complexes, but this was in another dimension. Whether the reporting sparkled can be assessed by others.
The Reporter Years

During my eight-plus years of writing and reporting, several editors and peers said I had a good sense for what was news and what would make a front-page story or get to the first block of a television newscast. There were no similar positives offered about my writing prowess.

A fondness for politics led me to trailing veteran newsman Bob Lahey around to political events. I helped rewrite our notes for late evening on-deadline call-ins to the copy desk. Lahey even let me fill in for him. When he was lured away to Governor Dan Walker’s press staff, I jumped at the chance to replace him.

The political beat got me to my first national political convention. The 1976 Democratic Convention was my first of 11 national conventions counting the virtual 2020 activities that replaced the pandemic-canceled gathering in Milwaukee. Staffing the Illinois delegation press operation taught me that the events were heavily covered and devoid of news. State delegations were mostly the backdrop for the national TV audience. Whipping up story ideas was crucial. Senators running for governor. Senators running for president. Each item helped fill the void. The conventions were also a great opportunity for Democratic activists to meet each other without driving six-plus hours.

A move to Springfield to create the Daily Herald’s first full-time Statehouse Bureau provided a great change of pace. It seemed good for both the paper and me to cover events in person rather than localizing wire copy with quotes from local senators or representatives.

There was time for a little investigative reporting, including a series on the abuse of state aircraft by top officials who always managed to schedule “official visits” near the site of a political fundraiser. The taxpayer-funded planes provided numerous award-winning investigative
opportunities until put out of business by former Governor Bruce Rauner, who replaced air travel by wasting thousands being driven to events across Illinois by the state police.

The years of daily deadline work and a few unsuccessful forays into moving “up” made other opportunities tempting. The stunning Jane Byrne upset of Chicago Mayor Michael Bilandic led to such an occasion. Friends had worked on her campaign and a job offer ensued.

Four tumultuous years later, Byrne’s 1983 reelection defeat had “exit” written all over it. The lure away from journalism was generally better money. Chicago city government proved that true. It was also a relief from the repetition of gathering seemingly similar stories on the same schedule year after year that could breed complacency. With Mayor Byrne, every day was something else.

Making the Sausage, AKA: Setting the Public Policy Agenda

It turns out working in the Legislature is nothing if not repetitious. In Illinois, a new General Assembly starts every two years. The three-month public relations contract grew into a semi-full-time job. The hybrid career evolved from my interest in actual legislation and a personal family budget built on a financial need to make more than state workers were making in the early ‘80s. The early consulting focused on advising investment bankers and pension fund managers on talks with municipal officials outside Illinois.

Later, the work focused on communications for not-for-profits, some local government groups, and several small businesses.

The 102nd General Assembly got underway in January of 2021 without Mike Madigan (he began with the 77th GA in 1972). The legislative routine began anew with a new raft of bills, a fresh budget proposed, and the once-in-a-decade redistricting of the legislative districts. The remap was sure to draw intensive media coverage, as it always does.
An important question to examine is how the public policy agenda is set. That is, how do some subjects draw the attention of the media, and ultimately the public? How do you get their attention? Can someone prepare for this? What is the definition of news, and how do some matters fall into that category, while other issues and debates within the Legislature never see the light of day?

One of the starting places is what impact is an issue likely to make on day-to-day life? Another is what chance does an impactful proposal have to become a regulation or a law?

Some might argue there are myriad ways to impact the public policy agenda. Grassroots groups constantly work to change how decisions get made. Others contend that the truth is that there is probably not much of a process. Stuff happens.

Usually, the media is involved in some aspects of the formation of public policy. The media will focus attention on an initial development, follow up with expert opinion, waxing on about solutions. An opposing opinion will get attention, too. A solution could evolve, or the attention wanes and the topic will drift away – unsolved, forgotten, or rudely shoved aside by the next eye-catching issue.

Sometimes the issue in question races quickly from bursting on the scene to the solution stage, while other matters may take years or never really be fully addressed.

In many instances, the media is often drawn to the most tantalizing or to efforts to legalize practices once regarded as taboo. The process could be a corollary of “man bites dog.”

Legalization of dope (AKA adult-use recreational cannabis), mandatory seat belt use, and gay rights could all be on such a list. The issue becomes “news” when the push for action becomes loud or pops up in multiple jurisdictions. Not that many years ago, a front-page story in a major newspaper could open the spigot. In current times the process is less clear.
Suddenly there is a trend. While some issues can develop a life of their own, others need skilled communications specialists to help focus the attention. The needed skills include crafting a message in an understandable fashion and focused follow-up with reporters, editors, and hosts with friendly but persistent reminders.

Many times, important topics never get much, or timely, attention. Fiscal issues almost always get shortchanged. Some might argue this is due to the perception of generally substandard math skills exhibited by many journalists. If you don’t pay much attention to personal finance, it is very likely a story about the state budget in disarray is not terribly appealing. Plus, it can be a hard story to tell.

There are exceptions, like the failure of a tax hike, or the mess caused when the assumed benefit of what was believed to have been a cost-cutting early retirement program vaporizes because no one accounted for the cost of paying for unused but reimbursable vacation or sick time.

Each category will contain topics that could be highlighted to attract broader public attention. The attention could translate into public support, and ultimately, passage. There are problems addressed and solutions applied that also grab attention because the trouble has already gained spot news media attention.

**Political Redistricting: A Once-in-a-Decade Exercise**

Remap is a creature all to itself in the legislature. Redistricting is so important – it is guaranteed to attract intensive media coverage. It is automatically on the public agenda. The only question is who will define and dominate the narrative. It can be a most intensively personal and political matter. Careers can be ended, and new opportunities appear. In the end it is getting into compliance with the state and federal Voting Rights Acts that is Job Number One.
There are outside interests that call for media attention and urge that authority for this remap process be ceded to nonpartisan or independent authorities to draw districts. Finding the “nonpartisan” seems like a curious way to govern.

Usually, some self-selected cast of characters declare themselves “watchdogs.” None of these advocates is known to have described what their Illinois looks like after their reforms are adopted. Smarter kids? Smoother roads? Cleaner air and water?

The 2021 remap process was even more complicated because the Census Bureau, led by President Donald Trump appointee Wilbur Ross, former Secretary of the Department of Commerce, bollixed up the process. The data was not released until well beyond the constitutionally mandated June 2021 deadline.

The coverage of the remap process this year was extensive, but it did not have a great degree of depth. It looked much like the previous three remaps I had observed. In this case, I took no direct role in this year’s media interaction, but it would seem to follow a similar track to earlier experiences. Those steps include letting the work speak for itself and stay clear of the rhetoric from critics, because some back-and-forth could impact future state and federal lawsuits.

Critics argued for the creation of a “fair map” process. Although there were ample opportunities, the critics never explained how their process would make Illinois better, or more importantly, comply with state and federal voting rights acts.

Previous redistricting efforts featured some of the same tactics. Once there was a citizen initiative petition process that went far afield. It was rejected by the courts because it sought to involve the Illinois Auditor General in the process.
The petition process was interesting because circulators were seen and heard in several cities promising potential petition-signers there would be “tax cuts” or “lower property taxes” if the petition drive were successful.

The 2021 version of “fair maps” promised to replace the current system with unknowns on a commission, and then the appointment of a tie-breaking unknown – supposedly neutral – person to enact a plan that would lead to more competitive elections. That may be good if you worked as a direct mail campaign consultant or a TV ad time buyer. Otherwise, it created more questions than answers.

As this is written, the 102nd General Assembly opted to retain the existing system. Two sets of legislative maps have passed. One met the Illinois Constitution deadline using the best available data. Governor J.B. Pritzker studied the work and signed the first legislative plan into law along with new plans for the Illinois Supreme Court and Cook County Board of Review. A second plan based on the final census data was enacted later in the summer. A bill to reapportion U.S. House districts was not taken up in May.

Challengers have filed their lawsuits as expected. Ultimately, the courts will have their say, the General Assembly and the governor will respond, and maps will be adopted in time for the 2022 elections.

**Everyday Legislating and Media Coverage**

The typical legislative session, if there is such a thing, can bring about many opportunities to attract media attention. Over the years, sessions could be dominated by topics such as health care for injured workers or gun safety.
Besides the annual routine of news about the state spending plan and the governor’s priorities as outlined in his State of the State speech, the general game plan is to track media coverage of issues on a state and local level.

National issues typically fell to the U.S. Congress. From time to time Congress drops the ball and a state-by-state solution could be attempted. Organizations like the National Conference of State Legislatures offered weekly newsletters and daily emails that helped keep track of how each state legislature was reacting to a specific issue. As a session approached, leadership and senior staff reviewed the landscape and assessed what might be occurring in Illinois and how legislation could help address problems or provide new levels of safeguards.

These ideas were shared with lawmakers, who were taking the pulse of their districts, too. Simultaneously, trade groups were engaged in similar surveys to plan for what might be coming their way.

Some legislators had the knack for doing this on their own. They crafted their legislation and a public communications plan to catch the attention of the media and ultimately the general public. Some lawmakers need help. The legislative staffs were there for that purpose.

Hundreds and hundreds of bills get introduced each session. Many have no reason to attract media attention. Some are simple regulatory changes sought by the regulated. Others can be state agencies trying to change existing laws governing their operations. In a rare instance, someone offers a measure to repeal an outdated statute. Officials like Illinois Auditor General Frank Mautino and his predecessors regularly offer advisories on outdated laws or regulations.

The textbooks are replete with descriptions of how the legislative process works – how a bill becomes law. These descriptions include the role of the parties and the party leaders in the
legislature, the role of the governor, the interest groups, the lobbyists, the guy next door, and even the media.

**“Most Powerful” Label Has a Touch of Urban Legend**

Away from the textbooks, the legislative process has often not been described that way in Illinois. The popular lore, pressed home repeatedly by the media and the critics, has been the narrative that the only things that really count in Illinois are the opinion and the interests of one player, former Speaker of the House Michael Madigan.

My experience as a close observer for almost four decades has shown me that it is a lot more complicated than the popular lore would suggest.
The invincibility of Speaker Madigan was generally created by media outlets looking for a shortcut to better define him for the reading/listening/viewing audience. The description ranged from “velvet hammer” to “most powerful Democrat” to “most powerful” period. These descriptions and other terms like “vetoproof” and “supermajorities” were phrases never used by me. It seemed boastful and unnecessary. It was the kind of language that only set someone up for a fall when the time would come that the seas did not open.

Such was the case in the 1990s when Madigan became very frustrated by the conduct of some police officers. The spectacular abuses committed by Chicago Police Commander Jon Burge and his crew were the most disgusting. Memory suggests that Madigan started moving about the same time former Governor George Ryan began questioning the depth of problems the state faced concerning wrongful convictions and capital punishment.

Some observers believed Ryan was trying to create a distraction from the Commercial Drivers’ License scandal swallowing his office. It seemed the Kankakee Republican and former House speaker always was sincerely outraged by what he saw. The first case for Ryan involved Anthony Porter. Ryan unilaterally halted executions and began an effort to close the death rows in Illinois prisons and commute sentences to life. Ultimately, Illinois repealed the death penalty (Ryan, 2020).

In 1997, Speaker Madigan opted to start a new course of reforms from the front end of the criminal justice process. He proposed a measure to require videotaping custodial interrogations of murder suspects. A straightforward, narrow proposal that was likely to prevent or severely limit wrongful prosecutions brought a firestorm of criticisms from police and prosecutors who suggested Madigan was trying to dismantle law enforcement at all levels. While
this mantra has been used repeatedly before and after Madigan’s efforts, it was an effective move that roadblocked the legislation in the early going.

In 1999, after nearly two years of no success, Madigan convened a task force of highly respected legal experts, who included former Appellate Court Justice Alan Greiman. Greiman was a very thoughtful former legislator who had been part of Madigan’s leadership team and lead negotiator on several complex and contentious issues. Madigan also utilized the skills of another top legislator who went on to be a judge, J. Michael Getty, to study and advise. The panel included top prosecutors, police officials, and police union leaders. In addition to the statewide firepower, William Geller, who was viewed as a national expert on videotaped interrogations, played a role. Madigan was seeking a solution.

The battle wore on until 2001 when House Bill 4697 saw Representatives Monique Davis and Sara Feigenholtz join Madigan in the effort to make videotaped confessions a reality. After four years, better understanding led police and police reform advocates to understand that the taping benefited both sides. Suspects learned they could not be coerced into making incriminating statements. Most police finally realized defendants could not complain that their confessions resulted from real or imagined police beatings.

Along the way, debate on the issue took many twists and turns. Former DuPage County State’s Attorney Joe Birkett became one of the most visible, outspoken statewide opponents.

Ironically, Birkett went on to become a Republican candidate for Illinois Attorney General. He lost to former Attorney General Lisa Madigan, the speaker’s daughter.

Passage of time can dull recollections, but it seems clear that Madigan’s multiyear effort can be viewed as an early step toward better policing in America. This movement was accelerated in 2014 by the unnecessary police shootings of Martin Brown and Michael Brown in
the St. Louis suburbs of St. Charles and Ferguson. These incidents led to extensive use of body cameras and an Obama administration policing task force that highlighted the need to elevate the role of mental health professionals as a first line of response rather than what was almost always uniformed police with guns drawn.

Years later, in the final months of the 101st General Assembly, Madigan supported the monthslong work of the Illinois Legislative Black Caucus to develop a wide-ranging initiative to address programs and services designed to assess inequities faced by people of color in Illinois.

Listening to recent law enforcement complaints about some proposals brought back memories of the debating points used against Madigan’s videotaped interrogations measure nearly a quarter century earlier. One can only wonder if the passage of time will bring about the same realizations.

Another irony occurred when the Chicago Tribune published an op-ed in April 2021 that stated: “In 2003, a little-known state senator named Barack Obama sponsored first-of-its-kind legislation aimed at addressing the problem of false confession … legislation requiring certain custodial interrogations be electronically recorded …” (Nirider, Brown, & Kaeseburg, 2021). The respected activists and academics who wrote the piece bringing the former president into the discussion is an eye-catcher, even if he was several years behind Madigan.

**Efforts to Grow Public Awareness**

Getting a bill to the top of the legislative heap and securing votes for passage is the task at hand. Getting the attention of a legislative leader like Madigan or former Senate President John Cullerton is a high priority for members, interest groups, and even the news media.

The media signal their interest with continued reporting, columns, editorials, and op-ed pieces endorsing the conclusions of an outlet’s reporting. If a leader were to support an idea,
success was likely to follow. Although some believed passage was never in doubt, the segment about the early efforts to approve videotaped interrogations is offered to counter that claim.

Any suggestion that Democrats march in lockstep ignores reality and the history of the Democratic Party. It always seemed a better, winning strategy was to develop bipartisan support whenever possible. In the day-to-day work of the Legislature, many bills pass with near-unanimous support. This point is particularly important when one hears claims from so many that the difficult problems are the result of the failings of a single caucus or political party.

It is also important to accurately gauge who really is in charge of state government. One only needed to watch the work of the executive branch at any level to know they were really in charge. Day to day, decisions were made, personnel hired and fired, and contracts awarded that were never even a twinkle in a lawmaker’s eye regardless of the length of career or perceptions of power.

Madigan tended to focus his energy and authority on helping rank-and-file lawmakers address local issues. Their work on local issues usually was in reaction to a local problem. If he could help them address the problem, it generally eased the headaches of reelection.

In the end, it led to support for continued leadership by Madigan. If they were an incumbent or a new recruit running for an open seat, Speaker Madigan wanted to find and help a candidate who could be successful in that district. In other words, he was focused on basic electoral politics, which is the essence of representative democracy. Staff work like mine followed that path.

Once an issue emerged, the outreach to the media could take several paths that evolved along with the changes to the shape and size of the news media and the Statehouse press corps.
Beyond the initial media push, subsequent efforts could include interview placements on radio or television programs.

The local versions of the network Sunday shows, as they have come to be known, were good outlets and could produce a waterfall effect as an on-air discussion led to the story being picked up by other organizations. It could mean more requests for interviews. For example, placing guests with *At Issue*, Bill Cameron, or other programs that have come and gone required good timing – the host might have his or her own idea of a good guest.

While the day-to-day interaction with reporters, editors, and news directors was a varied and largely interesting experience, the press secretary position offered opportunities to take part in the long-form interviews afforded by talk radio. The most memorable were segments with radio legends Tom Miller at WJPF-AM in Carterville and Springfield's Sam Madonia at WFMB-AM. Both seem to command a huge share of local audience and have the pleasant habit of not talking after asking the guest a question. Not all followed plan.

Steve Brown, right, poses with WJPF-AM *Morning Newswatch* host Tom Miller. Photo courtesy of the author.
The shows permitted guests to explain specific issues and actions in some detail. This is not usually the case when reporters are collecting quotes for stories being prepared on deadlines.

The late Tom Roeser provided almost monthly opportunities on his two-hour Sunday night show on WLS-AM in Chicago. Roeser was a staunch conservative and my job was usually that of the liberal. It was always a give-and-take. The appearances offered evidence the office was not ignoring any segment of the political spectrum.

Next steps are efforts to enlist interest groups to do the shows or get in front of social service organization meetings to talk about the new proposal. Such appearances could capture more media attention. At least the interest group can generate their own form of coverage on websites, in regular newsletters, or in bulletins.

In most cases, these follow-up steps are taken by colleagues. In my case, the Illinois House Issues Development unit was well-regarded for these collaborations.

While efforts by interest groups can be important, mentions by the news media or out-of-context figures can generate more significant and lasting impressions. For instance, an educational policy speech by a community’s top educator to the Rotary is good, but the same comments delivered by the local bank president can generally have broader impact.

In all instances there need to be follow-up with press releases and the full array of messages afforded by social media.

**The Springfield Press Corps: The More the Merrier**

The “more the merrier” has been a long-standing personal belief of mine. Fuller and more robust news coverage equals a better understanding of issues and circumstances. If the media is present in large numbers, chances also improve that reporters can find the time to look beyond
the constraints of daily deadlines. With the Legislature, the “big issues” – or the inevitable bonehead moments that occur with a prank sparked by a lack of good judgement – are almost sure bets for media attention. Getting to other important but generally obscure issues benefits from a larger press contingent.

In the ‘70s, WGN-TV news, which is now a shell of its former self, kept a two- to three-person crew and reporters like Steve Schickel at the Statehouse nearly every session day. Springfield-area TV stations kept crews at the building, too. However, the quest by ambitious on-air reporters to get to the bigger markets meant constant turnover and the never-ending need to reeducate reporters.

It should be noted camera operators/videographers remained the same and could be encouraged to help the newly hired on-air talent to not get overheated by fiery floor debate that often was a regular – but fake – tantrum.

These WGN-TV efforts came in an age when news actualities were still on film. The film needed to be flown to Chicago, rushed to the northside station, processed, edited, and put on the air. In the day it was a huge undertaking.

Compare it today, when a small box of technology allows a reporter to go live at a moment’s notice whenever a cell signal is detected.

In the era of the larger, pre-Internet Springfield press corps, radio news reporters were the most rapid method to move information into the public domain. Numerous stations had robust newsrooms and updated newscasts on the 30s all day long. They could also digest copy from the wires – Associated Press or United Press International – and report quickly.

WBBM-AM distinguished itself by sending correspondents to Springfield on most session days. Reporters like Alan Crane, Steve Crocker, and Craig Dellimore got to know the
beat and could be counted on to break big stories right along with the state’s big circulation daily newspapers.

In the ‘70s, afternoon newspapers had not completely disappeared. Early editions (Blue Streaks) hit the downtown Chicago streets about 9 a.m. and depending on the size and gravity of the headline, reporters were expected to chase “react” to whatever piece blazed across Page One.

If a newsmaker like Speaker Madigan offers a simple “under review” quote, the story could be topped off and live on.

Another element of a press secretary’s activities involved keeping track of brewing investigations and other in-depth reporting projects. General practice was to cooperate with enterprising reporters’ efforts. It also meant not sharing a reporter’s questions or document requests with others.

At times, reporters could be tipped to upcoming events with the hint that there was expectation they would come back to the “tipster” looking for a comment first.

Some of these recollections are now just dim memories of another era – more genial times. That pace has been quickened with a never-ending news cycle, meaning less time to develop stories. The pace tracks other aspects of life. Some think the jury is still out on whether the outcome is good, bad, or not actually much change.

Over time, Chicago TV stations came to cover the Legislature less often. End-of-session days or a big speech day (State of the State or the Budget speeches) were the most common times to expect the arrival.

Even local Springfield crews split time away from legislative proceedings. In recent years, Tony Yucius formed video crews from Advanced Digital Media (BlueRoomStream) to provide raw video of news conferences and other events. A relatively new venture by WGEM-
TV, the Quincy-based NBC affiliate, has seen reporter Mike Miletich and crew in the Statehouse Press Room full time. They provide stories to other downstate stations in Peoria, Rockford, and Carterville owned by Quincy Media Inc.

The loss of reporters assigned to the state Capitol beat has been a loss of quality and quantity of coverage that state government in general and the state Legislature in particular receive. The veteran news people who covered the Capitol for many years knew how the legislative process worked, knew who the major players were, and could capture and take back to their readers the story of what was really going on in Springfield.

The diluted reporter resources can mean less attention and a diminished understanding of the General Assembly’s work. It is fraught with risk that misinterpretation can occur. A preferred goal is to avoid a chance that anyone reports a measure was “quietly passed,” which is media speak for “we missed it.”

With that in mind, working alongside many talented House Democratic staffers, some time was spent hoping to focus media attention on specific bills that would catch the eye or ear of editors and news directors.

No real effort was needed to make legislative action more dramatic. Just get some coverage. Drama took care of itself.

Social media also offers a chance to compensate for the smaller press corps. It is not the same and the central goal is to reach the desired audience.

On another level, it was always amazing to note how many times reporters asked what time a bill would be called or when the chamber would adjourn. As someone who tried to manage the timing of some aspects of the operations to balance the flow of information with
deadlines, newscast times, and what is now referred to as the news cycle, it can be reliably reported here that accurate prediction of these matters cannot be done.

While no one kept a score card, most believed that trying to manage the news flow was a failed effort. Consideration and passage of legislation defied timing and planning.

Offering the media a heads-up tip was another sure way to guarantee timing would bog down. It also meant there would be a need for an explanation about why something did not happen when predicted. Unless caution was exercised, there was a risk of a “passage off the tracks” story.

Over time I had the knack of telling Statehouse reporters that “I did not do predictions.” The simple phrase avoided thousands of speculative conversations looking for an assessment of the fate of bills, spending plans, political campaigns, and the chances of clear skies. One small exception was a sense of semi-order to the length of the workday because of Michael Madigan’s penchant to have dinner at about 7 p.m. each evening.

Another reporting development that began as the press corps thinned was the evolution of the Capitol Fax newsletter and blog helmed by Rich Miller. The blog has become the go-to place to keep track of political and legislative doings day in and day out. Rich displays amazing energy and pace. The outlet is a great addition to the journalism scene, even if from time to time, Miller, like the Sun-Times’ late Steve Neal, felt the need to bash someone unnecessarily just to get their attention.

Miller referred to the author as the “Press Secretary General” (Miller, 2015). While it was taken as a compliment, I know there have been a great many women and men in similar posts who have done excellent work over the years. Former Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel also falsely claimed in a birthday proclamation that the author dictated items to Miller.
It must also be noted that Miller always seemed to be fond of my advice about answering media questions. It ran along the lines of: words out of their (media) mouths, words out of yours – statements don’t need to match up or be changed if the media re-asks the questions with slightly different phrasing or in a louder voice.

Every few years, a publication would use it as a quote as if were new material. Most reporters who came through the Illinois House could generally mouth the words as the words were spoken.

**The More the Merrier (and the Asterisk)**

The more the merrier motto hit an apex in the 1980s, when Chicago still had three daily newspapers and the *Daily Herald* and suburban dailies in the communities that ringed Chicago. Those numbers have dropped and the media in general has been dramatically thinned out. Now web-based organizations try to offer more local news. These entities seem to come and go.

Many are not-for-profits. Some are affiliated with public interest organizations or a murky affiliate of dark money lobbying groups. This will get some more attention later, but first let us look at the role of the actual press corps, AKA: “mainstream media.”

What is probably the lone exception to the “more the merrier” motto about the size of the Statehouse press corps and/or media focused on state government and the Legislature began around 2010 when there were regular reports about growing efforts to place advocacy-backed reporting teams into Statehouse press corps around the nation. These developments brought deep concern from media watchdogs who wondered about their financial backing and whether they were on the scene to promote a conservative point of view.

From a personal point of view, I had seen plenty of conservative reporting from the likes of the *Chicago Tribune* and other news organizations, so this was nothing new. What did seem
most concerning was the question of whether this was just an extension of a lobbying effort masquerading as news.

Would the work of these teams be portrayed as credible, balanced accounts to be used when developing policy and programs?

The opening salvo in Illinois came via the Illinois Policy Institute and ties to the Franklin Center. Common office address and phone lines. As of August 2021, the IPI described itself as an "independent organization generating public policy solutions aimed at promoting personal freedom and prosperity" (Illinois Policy Institute, 2021). They seemed to focus an extraordinary amount of attention on what were usually reported as failings of Democrats and unions. Efforts to control pollution or minimize workplace injury or improve health care safety were almost always reported as onerous regulation that drove up business costs and hurt prosperity.

Scott Reeder, a veteran reporter, brought things to a head when he sought credentials on behalf of the IPI. Anticipating such a move, personal research suggested the affiliation of the reporting or content-gathering activity might just be another tactic in a lobbying game plan. That raised a red flag in both the House and Senate.

Media credentials provided one key privilege – access to press boxes on the House floor. The seats offered a bird’s eye view of activities, audio plug-ins for radio reporters, and the ability to catch the attention of a legislator and get a few questions answered. At the very least it was a time saver. In the ‘70s, the press boxes also contained phones, which in the precellular era was a big plus. The credential did not guarantee workspace in the Statehouse Press Room, a parking space, or access to press conferences. Those decisions fell to long-established traditions within the Illinois Legislative Correspondents Association and the legal building management duties of the Illinois Secretary of State.
The logical step to take seemed to be following legislative rules that governed access to the floor. Elected members, staff, and various assistants were all that were allowed on the floor. Visitors were for the most part seated in the gallery and recognized from the floor. Exceptions were granted to visiting dignitaries representing foreign governments or college or professional athletes who won national championships. Former members were welcomed back unless they were registered lobbyists. If the organizations lobbied, it seemed inappropriate to grant press credentials. Counterparts in the Illinois Senate, including former Press Secretary Rekesha Phelon, took the same action.

The decision brought on a 2015 federal lawsuit, Reeder and the IPI v. Michael J. Madigan. The case was dismissed, and an appeal resulted in a ruling that essentially stated the House had the ability to make their rules governing access (Reeder v. Madigan, 2015). The IPI and other similar groups have tried various configurations to distinguish their lobbying arms from their content-gathering efforts. It has not altered the initial denial.

Since the court case, the same decision has been applied to requests from the Better Government Association. The BGA is a long-tenured “watchdog” that over several decades has partnered with established news organizations to expose corrupt practices. Probably the most notable might have been the Mirage Series in the Chicago Sun-Times (Zekman & Smith, 1978). The BGA and the paper operated a bar on Chicago’s near north side and revealed a seemingly never-ending series of bribe solicitations from city inspectors of all shapes and sizes (Spinner, 2018). The reporting crew featured former SIU School of Journalism professor Bill Recktenwald, who was part of the BGA team for the Mirage project. Recktenwald died in August 2021 at age 79 (Goldsborough, 2021). The BGA had checked the “yes” box on Line 3 Part IV of their IRS Form 990 that stated their intent to lobby.
Another organization denied credentials is Capitol News Illinois, which was organized by the Illinois Press Foundation. The foundation is affiliated with the Illinois Press Association. The Association is a registered lobbyist.

Some have argued that each of these groups should be credentialed. The debate will continue. At this point, it does not appear newly elected House Speaker Chris Welch or Senate President Don Harmon will make a change.

The situation can be filled with mixed emotions from someone who fervently believes that more reporters involved in legislative coverage means the public/taxpayers/voters have a better chance to know what is being done to and for them. A limited or focused perspective is not troublesome, but failure to provide a complete background concerning the origins of those doing the reporting can be.

But this is only one of the new newsgathering practices that could be troubling.

**The State of Journalism in Today’s Statehouse**

The previously mentioned Illinois Legislative Correspondents Association was weighing this credentialing situation, too. The organization has through the years made recommendations on press room space allocation.

The ILCA is an interesting group. A search of *Illinois Blue Books* indicates it was formed in the 1940s (Illinois Secretary of State, 1945). It was composed of both full-time Statehouse reporters and journalists like Bill O’Connell from the *Peoria Journal Star*. He is mentioned because when I was placed in a press room office and told to pay attention, he had forgotten more about the Legislature, politics, and journalism than anyone else could hope to learn. The guidance was correct. He became a mentor and a longtime friend.
Many experienced reporters were quick to guide young writers or visiting journalists sent in to cover the Legislature. Among the veteran Statehouse reporters with great institutional memories was Mike Lawrence, who went on to serve as Governor Jim Edgar’s press secretary and then Associate Director and Director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute, and Charlie Wheeler, who also reported for the Chicago Sun-Times and went on to serve as Director of the Public Affairs Reporting Program at the University of Illinois Springfield. Another with decades of experience and a mentor’s mind was Bernie Schoenberg, the recently retired Springfield State Journal-Register political editor.

Finally, this recollection would be incomplete without mentioning the arrival of the Illinois Lawmakers venture launched by the state’s public broadcasting stations in 1986. Anchored first by Chicago broadcaster Bruce Dumont and since 2005 by WSIU’s Jak Tichenor and crewed by WTVP and WSIU, the continuing series offers multiple shows each session that cover the big speech days and long-form interviews in the final weeks with actual legislators talking in-depth on high-visibility issues. The series has been an excellent complement to the daily deadline legislative coverage. The impetus for all this came from the Speaker’s Office, when a funding source seemed large enough to fund a satellite truck and annual grants to the stations grew out of the debate to legalize off-track betting.

The 1951-52 Illinois Blue Book shows a photo of much of the membership seated in cramped-looking space described as the A.L. (Ted) Sloan Press Room (Illinois Secretary of State, 1951). It was located on the third-floor east hall of the Capitol. It was later a nurse’s station and now is part of the Room 300 suite of offices occupied by Speaker Emanuel “Chris” Welch.
Thirty years ago, those who gathered content – reporters, journalists, photographers, videographers – had the time to attend a news conference or schedule interviews, research blank spots, track down alternative points of view, and prepare a report.

It might take much of the day to prepare the reporting from a news conference. Even a pace that stretched over a workday might seem to be a fast pace. Television preparation was more compressed and required visuals. Catchy sound bites or action-oriented images were preferred. In some instances, there was a chance to collaborate with press room colleagues. This was especially true of everyone who was writing about a Blue Room press conference.

In recent years, technology has driven the coverage. Reporters are expected to cover an event, question a subject, take photos or video, and file comments on a Twitter account. It seems like a lot to ask. The storied role of the critical and demanding gruff editor has been diminished or even eliminated, and they are subject to the same time pressures as the reporters. No assessment of the quality of the reporting is offered here, but some find it worrisome.

The process has some value in terms of the real-time disbursement of information, but there are numerous shortcomings, like the near-total absence of time to seek balance from the first step in distributing the information. All too often, editors place the unbalanced work online and tell the reporter to get the other side for inclusion later.

Another flaw in this rapid-fire style is the unsatisfactory approach to correcting mistakes. In the past, corrections might appear the following day and regular readers seemed likely to see the item. Now the correction does not always follow and if the reader does not check back – poof.

Regardless of the changing landscape, the essentials of being an effective spokesperson seem much like the essentials of being a competent reporter except for starting from a different
point in the food chain. The newsmaker or spokesperson should lay out the topic in a clear, concise manner with as little jargon or subject matter nomenclature as possible. The newsmaker should be prepared to answer questions and/or return reporter calls to fill in the blanks. Proper preparation makes the process go well. A little dress rehearsal or Q and A never hurt.

**Side Trips**

It seems like this recounting of my time as press secretary for Mike Madigan would be incomplete without a mention of the interesting side trips taken during those four decades that filled out the time between legislative sessions. Some were high profile; others were little more than worthwhile personal projects.

The higher profile includes the request to spend the last six weeks of the November 1992 General Election campaign by taking up residence at the Palmer House Hotel in Chicago to try to help steer the campaign of former U. S. Senator Carol Moseley Braun’s campaign to victory.

While the public perception was that CMB’s election was never in doubt after she beat Alan Dixon in the primary and faced Former NATO Ambassador Rich Williamson in the November election, nothing was further from the truth.

Braun had gone from a national star who got near-daily media attention during Bill Clinton’s New York convention to a flaming car wreck beset by what are now short-handed as “Me Too” issues and some ugly, complicated financial accusations involving a family member.

Braun won. Some of us at the helm adopted a plan to largely keep her a few paces away from the media. Close enough for repeated pictures of that million-dollar smile, but too far to engage in much Q and A or give and take.
She became the first Black woman to be elected to the U.S. Senate. Following a single term, she served as the U.S. ambassador to New Zealand. As a media adviser, it was a singularly amazing event.

In 1994, there was a similar request to help Cook County Circuit Court Clerk Aurie Pucinski run for Cook County Board president. It was a hard-fought primary that saw John Stroger win. It was another topsy-turvy campaign that taught all the participants a lot. Today, Justice Pucinski serves as an Illinois Appellate Court judge in Cook County.

On a more personal level, a chance encounter with fellow SIU grad Bernie Bernacki led to a very grassroots campaign to elect Elmhurst, Illinois native Fred Lorenzen to the NASCAR Hall of Fame. Lorenzen was a bona fide star in the early days of NASCAR but lacked the firepower to attract the necessary national attention. We worked hard with social media and various earned free media opportunities. A chance meeting with NASCAR veteran Kenny Wallace led to him agreeing to work his contacts.

Wallace signed up during a meeting in Springfield while he was lobbying with the Illinois Corn Growers Association. Very strong support came from Scott Paddock, the president who ran the Chicagoland Speedway in Joliet. He spread the word through his Illinois network and other racing officials, including the ownership of the Talladega Speedway.

It took three years, but Lorenzen was elected to the Hall of Fame class of 2015. He was able to accompany his family to the induction ceremony in Charlotte. The gleam in his eye was a reward for the success of this campaign.

Finally, a family friend often talked about his dad who competed nationally as a senior class weightlifter. In 2012, Ron Millard won a U.S. championship and earned a spot in the world championship. But money was too tight to afford a trip to Kiev. Without being asked, an effort
was launched to find the resources. Some Illinois contacts with Turkish Airlines produced an offer of airfare. Some local fundraising was spurred by coverage in the *Peoria Journal Star* and on radio and television, which raised money for hotels, cabs, and meals. Mr. Milliard won his division and became what is likely to be Washington, Illinois’ only world champion in this event.

**Conclusion**

In each instance of this freelancing, working with the media proved to be a central ingredient to a good outcome and rewarding in ways that are not easy to put into words and impossible to have included in any career plan when journalism seemed like the career to pursue more than 50 years ago. It has been an interesting, sometimes exciting, sometimes frustrating, and I believe, useful career in public service helping Illinois work toward a better definition of the public interest and the common good. Certainly, the growing complexity of society seems to make problem-solving and the attendant requirements of public communications more complicated. While we can be hopeful of more success, others will need to assess whether the success is complete.
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