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ABOUT WISCONSIN



On the Capitol Beat

The scoop on Wisconsin's capitol press corps

by Jillian Slaight

A farmer leafing through the newspaper lingers over an article about agriculture bills before the state senate; a teacher turns up the radio to hear a soundbite of her state representative speaking on a controversial education bill; and a TV segment about a “Hometown Hero” catches the attention of the award recipient’s neighbor. For 175 years, Wisconsinites have relied on the capitol press corps to learn what is happening inside the Wisconsin State Legislature. The news coverage these reporters provide may shape whether members of the public approve or disapprove of their elected representatives and, consequently, how

they vote. It may also inform legislators’ understanding of the issues facing them in committee rooms and on the senate and assembly floors.

The capitol press corps has existed as long as the legislature itself, but many know little about it. Historians draw from newspaper, radio, and television archives to understand and describe key figures in Wisconsin political history, but these sources are silent on the reporters who broke—rather than made—the news. In an effort to illuminate the people behind the bylines, Legislative Reference Bureau staff began conducting long-form audio interviews with past and

Reporters cover remarks from Governor Tommy Thompson in December 2000 at the state capitol in Madison.

present members of the capitol press corps in January 2022. This ongoing oral history project aims to capture the memories of these journalists, whose collective experience spans 50 years, and record stories that might otherwise be lost to history.

This article invites readers to learn more about the role that political reporters play in Wisconsin government. Part I lays out the types of news outlets that have covered the capitol, focusing on how the differences between these outlets shape reporters' experiences. Part II profiles past and present members of the capitol press corps, describing their paths to Wisconsin politics and their efforts to earn reputations for accuracy and trustworthiness. Part III dives into the stories covered by members of the press corps, and Part IV describes the nexus of those stories: the pressroom in 217 SW. Finally, Part V discusses the challenges that capitol reporters face in the course of keeping Wisconsinites informed of the activities of state government—and the rewards that motivate them to pursue this work despite its challenges.

I. The Outlets

Since Wisconsin achieved statehood in 1848, capitol news has been reported by newspaper, wire service, radio, television, and the Internet. The particularities of each type of outlet shape the work of its capitol reporters, dictating their deadlines, word limits, and areas of focus. Each technological development—from the invention of the telegraph wire to the rise of social media—pressures reporters to report political news faster.

“Newspapers in Wisconsin were not far behind the first settlers,” writes Donald E. Oehlerts: Albert G. Ellis hauled the first printing press to the territory and began publishing the *Green Bay Intelligencer* in December 1833.¹ Competitors soon sprang up in Green Bay and other emerging settlements. By 1848, most newspapers served as the “political mouthpiece” of a particular person or party; since newspapers reached a wide swathe of voters, they were an efficient way to mobilize political support.² Even sparsely populated locales often boasted more than one weekly newspaper: the launch of a Democratic news outlet invariably prompted the launch of a Whig or Republican rival.³ In this landscape, early statehouse reporters battled to control the narrative around legislative debates and controversies. As a result, competing reports of the same events varied widely.

But over time, neutrality became more profitable than partisanship. As early as the 1840s, newspaper editors began to publish short news dispatches received

by telegraph, which broke news from far-flung locales faster than news could travel by train.⁴ Agencies such as the Associated Press (AP) gathered and sold these dispatches to member newspapers across the country. Since these newspapers' party loyalties varied, AP reporters strove for objectivity, and the constraints of wire service reporting—longer copy cost more to transmit—discouraged the inclusion of anything beyond the most essential facts.⁵ By the late nineteenth century, newspaper editors began to follow the AP's lead and emphasized unbiased reporting in order to broaden their readership and attract more advertisers.⁶



WHS IMAGE ID 23448

Many early capitol reporters covered the state legislature for partisan newspapers, which openly supported specific parties and politicians.

Wire services complemented rather than competed with newspapers, but subsequent technological developments threatened print's dominance. In 1905, the first year the *Wisconsin Blue Book* recorded the names of statehouse reporters, E. R. Petherick of AP was the lone representative of a wire service or national news outlet.⁷ But as radio and television news emerged, reporters from those outlets “scooped” their print competitors by breaking news first and enhancing it with sound and visuals.⁸ Radio news gained ground during World War II by satisfying Americans' demand for a steady stream of information about the conflict.⁹ Television news followed, becoming a substantial force during the turbulent 1960s, when “the political and social turmoil of the decade produced compelling images for television news.”¹⁰ Footage of the Dow Riots in 1967, for example, conveyed their intensity to viewers watching hundreds of miles from Madison.

Few sources document the experiences of Wisconsin's early capitol press corps. However, several reporters interviewed for the LRB's oral history project began covering the state legislature in the 1970s and 1980s. Their recollections demonstrate how news outlets shaped the types of stories reporters told and how they told them. Before Internet use became widespread in the late 1990s, the

Women in the press corps

Women reporting on the Wisconsin capitol navigated a male-dominated pressroom for over a century. LRB analyst Isaac Lee identified Alice Krombholz as the first known female member of the press corps, covering the capitol for the *Milwaukee Sentinel* in the mid-1930s. By the early



This portrait of Lucille Bystrom, a capitol correspondent during the 1940s, still graces the walls of the pressroom.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CAPITOL PRESS CORPS

1940s, an increasing number of women reporters kept Wisconsin updated as the country mobilized for World War II. Betty Pryor reported on the capitol for the United Press during and after the war, when fellow journalists elected her an officer of the newly formed Wisconsin Capitol Correspondents Association.ⁱ Lucille Bystrom—formerly a society editor for the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*—joined her in the pressroom in 1948 as a capitol correspondent for the *Milwaukee Sentinel*.

Still, the legislature remained something of an “old boys club,” and male reporters reaped the benefits of fraternizing with the mostly male legislators. For example, in the 1950s and '60s, politicians and reporters went on alcohol-fueled fishing trips as part of a social club called the Piscatorial and Inside Straight Society (PISS), which boasted members like Governor Warren Knowles.

ⁱⁱ Male reporters could get tips from adjacent barstools at the Inn on the Park or adjacent bathroom stalls in the men’s room between the pressroom and the assembly chamber. By the late twentieth century, the culture began to change. “I never felt like I was being snubbed by the good old boys in the legislature,” commented Amy Rinard, who worked the capitol beat in the 1990s. By 2019, nearly half of the capitol press corps members were women. Among this cohort, several interviewees pointed to Gwyn Guenther of The Wheeler Report as a “strong leader” and central figure. In general, Emilee Fannon noted, “women are all there for each other and you can always reach out and talk to someone.”

i. “Capitol Reporters Form Association,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, January 17, 1945.

ii. Piscatorial and Inside Straight Society records, 1953–2007, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, M2010-001 MAD 3/27/A2.

routines and priorities of a reporter for a morning newspaper varied distinctly from those of a wire service reporter or a radio reporter, and even from a reporter for an afternoon paper.

For newspaper reporters, printing schedules dictated deadlines and, consequently, the daily pressures of the job through the 1990s. Reporters not only had

to find important stories but also had to race to file them before the newspaper went to press. *Milwaukee Sentinel* reporters, for example, risked missing the widely read state edition of the morning paper if they filed later than six or seven in the evening. Deadlines like these proved problematic during late-night floor sessions, when Steve Walters found himself asking his editors, “Look, if they pass a budget at twelve thirty, do you want to stop the presses and hit, maybe, half the papers for the city of Milwaukee edition? Or do you want to let it pass?” But evening deadlines meant reporters working for the morning papers could start their days later. Tom Still recalled that at the *Wisconsin State Journal* in the 1980s, “nobody was there any earlier than ten.” Conversely, reporters for afternoon papers like the *Milwaukee Journal* were expected to file stories before noon. Some reporters viewed these early deadlines as placing the *Journal* at a “competitive disadvantage,” especially if news broke in the afternoon.

Opposing deadlines fueled fierce competition, especially between reporters for two Milwaukee papers, the *Milwaukee Journal* and the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, which were bitter rivals before merging in the 1990s. *Sentinel* reporter and later bureau chief Steve Walters noted, “I . . . was judged and scored by how often I beat the *Journal*.” His *Sentinel* colleagues considered their paper “the underdog” and focused on undercutting the larger and more amply staffed *Journal* by any means possible, said Amy Rinard. To that end, Rinard and others sought to convince legislators and agency heads to release important information in the afternoon, after the *Journal* deadline had passed. This rivalry also shaped the type of stories each paper published. “The *Sentinel* was very focused on reporting on what happened that day,” explained Lee Bergquist. Consequently, shorter stories took precedence over longer, more analytical stories, called “thumb suckers” in reporters’ parlance. By contrast, said Dick Jones, the *Journal* compensated for its deadline disadvantage by devoting “more time and more people to . . . explore issues more in-depth.” The *Journal* also published a Sunday edition, granting its capitol reporters more space to publish longform articles.

Meanwhile, reporters from other papers carved their own niches. For example, in the 1980s, the *State Journal* differentiated itself from the *Milwaukee Journal* and the *Sentinel* by focusing its attention on executive agencies instead of the internal politics of the legislature. Tom Still described how he devoted several months to pursuing evidence of vulnerabilities in the state computer system, which he and fellow reporter Paul Rix laid bare by hacking into that system.¹¹ Reporters for local newspapers were more interested in addressing the concerns of their local readership than with scooping the bigger papers. “My job,” commented Stan Milam of the *Janesville Gazette*, “[was] to not only cover state government

but, more importantly, to cover the local elected representatives and senators on how they worked within those issues.” Although these specializations alleviated some of the pressure to scoop other papers, all reporters raced to file stories before their paper’s deadline.

In contrast, reporters for wire services like AP and United Press International (UPI) worked against rolling (rather than fixed) deadlines; for these reporters, the pressure to produce stories almost instantaneously predated the rise of the Internet. “If you write for

an afternoon newspaper,” Dick Jones explained, “you’re running throughout the morning until the last absolute deadline, which might be one o’clock in the afternoon. And then you could kick back or catch your breath and work on stories for the next day.” But wire service reporters like Jones, who joined UPI in 1974, felt no such relief. Wire service subscribers included various newspapers and broadcasters, which published or aired stories at all hours of the day. Meeting these continuous deadlines was a “migraine-producing experience” akin to “churning out hamburger,” reflected Rob Zaleski, who also worked in the UPI’s capitol bureau in the 1970s.¹²

Hard limits on story length also continued to distinguish wire service reporting from newspaper reporting, even after reports were no longer carried over telegraph wires. In the 1970s and 1980s, UPI imposed a 300-word limit on most stories. Dick Jones called this limit “a source of frustration” because he “especially enjoyed interviewing people and doing features.” Working for AP decades later, in the 2000s, JR Ross also found himself running into word limits. In one instance, he spent months investigating disparities in graduation rates between University of Wisconsin–Madison student athletes and other students, focusing specifically on the 1993 freshman class and members of the Rose Bowl–winning Badger football team. Ultimately, he “crammed everything [that he] could [into] 1,100 words”—the longest story he wrote for AP.

Radio reporting also demands brevity and challenges reporters to communicate



WHS IMAGE ID 113351

Wire service reporters had no fixed deadlines. Instead, they sent news stories to subscriber newspapers and broadcasters via teletype machine, like the one pictured here, at all hours of the day.

complex information in short time frames. “[T]here’s only a certain number of facts that you can get across in a one-minute—even a five-minute—radio spot,” noted John Powell, who joined the capitol press corps full time in 1975. That same year, John Colbert began covering the capitol for WTSO, where a five-minute newscast contained as many as fifteen stories; none of Colbert’s reports could go over forty seconds. Including soundbites from newsmakers, or “actualities,” meant losing time to communicate important details about the subject at hand. Jeff Roberts, who ran a capitol news service for subscribing radio stations, filed reports as short as thirty seconds.

Being concise was only half the battle. Radio reporting required technical



TOM KELLY

Reporter Dick Jones (*center*) interviews Governor Patrick Lucey (*left*) alongside his press secretary, Jeff Smoller (*right*), in the wake of the Menominee Warrior Society’s month-long occupation of the Alexian Brothers Novitiate in January 1975.

The art of the interview

John Colbert learned the key to interviewing in 1970, when he was barely 20 years old. His station manager at WCOW Radio in Sparta, Wisconsin, John D. Rice, told him: “Pat Lucey’s a Democrat, he’s running for governor. Go interview him.” With some trepidation, Colbert asked what he should say or ask, to which Rice replied: “Listen. Listen to what he says. Listen to his answers. Pay attention and go from there.” That advice guided Colbert throughout his decades-long reporting career. As fellow radio reporter John Powell acknowledged, listening during an interview is no small feat: “[Y]ou have to have some idea of where you’re going and what questions you want to ask; [and] at the same time, you have to listen to what the person is saying, and if they say something particularly interesting . . . you have to change gears and follow that up.”



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN COLBERT

In their interviews with the Legislative Reference Bureau, John Colbert (*left*) and John Powell (*right*) said that radio reporting in the 1970s and 1980s required a certain amount of technological expertise and lots of bulky equipment.

expertise and heavy, bulky equipment. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Colbert recalled, “I had a big leather bag with a Sony tape recorder, a couple of microphones, microphone stand, long cables for the microphone, [and] short cables for plugging into audio systems in the capitol.” He carried this bag with him at all times, “because you never know when you might get called up from the radio station at six in the morning to cover a tornado in Barneveld—which I was.” Although Powell benefited from a permanent recording space on the third floor of the capitol, he crouched underneath its six-foot ceilings to record stories on a reel-to-reel tape recorder. He produced as many as four stories a day for WHA, which meant not only writing copy but also recording audio and splicing in soundbites for each one.

Reporting to a listening audience, as opposed to a reading audience, also poses distinct challenges. As Powell explained, print not only lets a journalist include more information, but also allows readers to choose whether to skim or absorb each detail, depending on their level of interest. With radio, the audience’s attention ebbs and flows: “So many people are in their cars, and you’re telling a news story, and the person is cut off in traffic, and they have to mentally divert . . . [and] lose track of what you’re saying.” These circumstances require radio reporters to think differently about how to capture and retain the audience’s attention. To this end, Colbert and Powell both relied on the strength of their voices. Colbert characterized himself as “a reporter who was blessed with having

a talent of having a voice,” but noted that he never coasted on his natural ability. Instead, he performed frequent “air checks,” i.e., recording himself speaking on air, listening back, and critiquing himself. Singing on the drive into work and drinking ice water before a broadcast also helped.

Television reporters, like radio reporters, must pay attention to vocal presentation but have the added complication of visual presentation. While visuals may enhance reporting, incorporating them is time consuming and difficult. Many TV reporters today are multimedia journalists, or MMJs, who are expected not only to report out stories but also to shoot accompanying video and edit the audio and video together. The scope of these responsibilities results in a mad scramble on some busy session days. “I’m trying to gather soundbites on four separate stories,” Jessica Arp explained, “but we need sound [and] video for each one of those things.” And waiting for the perfect soundbite or video clip, Emilee Fannon noted, often means remaining “stuck behind a camera” in a committee room rather than back in the pressroom, writing her story. A.J. Bayatpour noted that while he enjoys “getting kind of creative with what I’m shooting,” juggling information-gathering, shooting, and editing makes for some “very compressed, stressful days.”

Moreover, many political stories translate poorly to the TV screen, requiring MMJs to think creatively about visuals. Emilee Fannon explained, “Sometimes politics can be a little black and white. Democrats say this, Republicans say this . . . and here’s what the bill will do: X, Y, and Z. But visually telling it can always be a challenge.” Both she and Arp alluded to the pitfalls of BOPSA (“bunch of people sitting around”) video footage of committee hearings and floor sessions. Arp said she frequently asked herself, “How do we take this story out of the capitol? How do we visualize it to the average person at home?” To this end, TV reporters described relying on stock footage to depict the topic of a bill under debate, such as video of a busy restaurant to accompany a story on a bill about the minimum wage. Selecting the right visual could enliven a story that might otherwise be considered “dry.”

Like radio and wire reporters, TV reporters also contend with hard and fast limits on story length. Emilee Fannon’s stories used to be capped at one minute and forty-five seconds at ABC 27 and were further reduced when she transferred to CBS 58: “I now get [one minute and fifteen seconds] to tell people everything that happened at a capitol session day.” Any time spent explaining backstory to the audience chips away at that limit. Accordingly, Fannon described making difficult decisions about what to cover on air—for example, highlighting the “most compelling” two bills in a package of ten. And as successive hosts of “Capital



JOE KOSHOLLEK, LEGISLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHER

Television journalists like Emilee Fannon (*foreground*) have met the challenges of the medium, often communicating complex stories in the span of a minute or less.

Big stories on the small screen

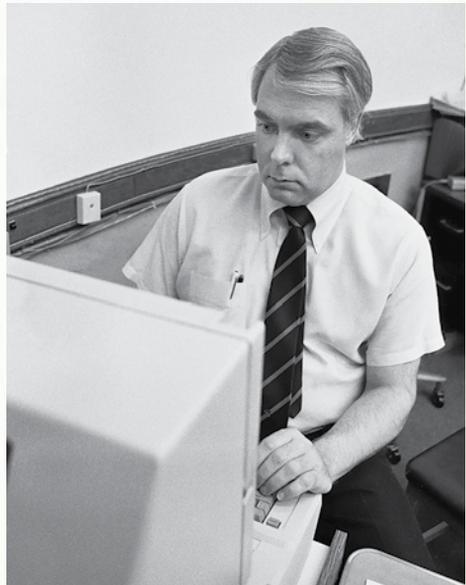
Several interviewees suggested that until recent years, few TV stations devoted resources to meaningful coverage of the capitol; instead, the stations simply sent cameras to key events. The presence of TV cameras, in turn, prompted lawmakers to stage events for better visuals—a source of frustration for reporters in audio and print media. “Too many times, people would bow to the TVs,” John Colbert commented. “You’d be [at a] news conference, you’d be there on time at [9 a.m.], and they wouldn’t start until twenty after because they were waiting for the cameras to show up.” This annoyance prompted disdain towards TV reporters in the pressroom. According to Steve Walters, that began to change with the arrival of Jessica Arp of WISC-TV in 2007. “She really was the first full-time TV reporter that treated it as a serious beat, day in and day out.” But Arp and other TV reporters interviewed by the LRB still mentioned feeling they needed to prove themselves to other members of the press corps. Overcoming the perception that TV reporters are “only in it to be on TV,” commented A.J. Bayatpour, requires showing up regularly and investing time and energy in understanding the legislative process.

City Sunday” on ABC 27, both Fannon and Bayatpour booked longer interviews with legislators and other state and local officials; Bayatpour explained that these conversations enable him to engage with certain issues in greater depth and build a rapport with legislators.

Finally, in addition to newspaper, wire service, radio, and TV, which are geared toward the general public, subscriber services have delivered news and legislative tracking information for 50 years or more. These services operate much like wire services, providing fast and frequent updates on state government; however, they orient these updates towards an audience of capitol insiders, including legislators and lobbyists. Dick Wheeler cut his teeth as a wire service reporter at UPI before launching *The Wheeler Report* in 1972, keeping subscribers apprised of everything from floor votes to fiscal estimates and budget motions. By 1998, the service migrated online, with subscribers accessing updates through emails and an accompanying website.¹³ Shortly after, in June 2000, Jeff Mayers launched *WisPolitics*, another Internet-based subscriber news service—or as Mayers called it, “a wire service for political junkies and government junkies.”

Although reporters for subscriber services share the same skills as their peers at AP and UPI—the ability to write quickly in a neutral style—their intended audiences differ substantially. As JR Ross explained, “I always said my audience [at AP] was a mile wide and an inch deep. At *WisPolitics*, my audience is an inch wide and a mile deep.” For example, whereas AP does not devote a great deal of attention to changes in legislative leadership beyond the top roles, *WisPolitics* will analyze the significance of changes in the number four and five leadership spots in a party caucus. Similarly, Gwyn Guenther, who has led *The Wheeler Report* since her father’s death in 2011, has emphasized that the service caters to issues of interest to its subscribers: “We don’t write stories on everything the way traditional media do.”¹⁴ As

Dick Wheeler earned a reputation as a legend among the capitol press corps. As founder of *The Wheeler Report*, he created a channel for insider information about the legislature.



the economic models underlying traditional media outlets evolve, it remains to be seen whether the subscription model will expand—whether, as Jeff Mayers put it, everyone would “do like Netflix and [pay] \$10 a month for great news.”

II. The People

Reporters interviewed by the LRB followed different paths to the capitol pressroom, but their reflections on these paths indicated some key commonalities, including the value of curiosity, discretion, hard work, and help from mentors.

Several interviewees established a connection with the press generally, and newspapers specifically, during childhood. JR Ross’s connection developed alongside a Sunday tradition in his household: “My dad got the Sunday paper every week, and we would put a stack of albums on the turntable, and he’d read it from cover to cover. So I was reading the paper from the time I was six or seven—even [when] I couldn’t really read it.” As an airline mechanic at National Airport in Washington D.C., Tom Still’s father brought home newspapers that he found discarded on planes. Still enjoyed paging through the news from disparate places “because . . . as a young person, it gives you a perspective about what’s going on elsewhere.”

Other interviewees described how specific events sparked their interest in political journalism. John Colbert remembered watching the first televised presidential debate between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy as a ten-year-old in 1960 and discussing it with his older brothers around the dinner table. Similarly, Lee Bergquist recalled the excitement he felt upon breaking the news to the



WHIS IMAGE ID: 54821

Learning the news business

Before writing for newspapers, several interviewees distributed them. As a kid in Edina, Minnesota, Steve Schultze delivered the *Minneapolis Star* Monday to Saturday. Jeff Smoller was a carrier for the *Milwaukee Sentinel* long before his bylines appeared in the *Milwaukee Journal*. And Patrick Marley spent mornings in Ames, Iowa, delivering the *Des Moines Register*, a paper to which his parents were “religious subscribers.” For many, this job was the foundation of their interest in print media—or as Dick Jones explained, “[A]t a very early age, I knew the roar of the pressroom.”

Renegade broadcaster

As a high school student, Stan Milam was laser-focused on becoming a disc jockey. Milam and friend Jim Mosher skipped school to secure their third-class FCC permits in Chicago, a prerequisite to working as student engineers at WCLO in Janesville. On the side, the duo installed and operated a radio transmitter in the attic of the Mosher home: “It was only supposed to broadcast in your living room. Well, we souped it up and it covered about a two-or-three-block area. I believe the statute of limitations has run out, so I can admit this—[I] violated federal law.” Friends would request songs—by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and other “British Invasion” bands—earlier in the day, then park nearby to listen live.



WHIS IMAGE ID 138472

A WIBA disc jockey in the 1950s.

Bergquist household that President Lyndon Johnson would not seek reelection: “He had said it at the end of a telecast from the Oval Office, and my parents had not stayed up to watch him. The next morning, I opened up the paper and it was the top headline. I couldn’t wait to tell my parents the news.” David Callender recalled the 1972 presidential contest between Richard Nixon and challenger George McGovern, which he followed for a school project, as “the thing that really whetted my interest in government and politics.”

For several interviewees, educators encouraged these burgeoning interests by recognizing and fostering their skills as future journalists. For Steve Walters, a fourth grade teacher’s affirmation—“Steve, you can write”—set him on a path to newspaper reporting. Likewise, a teacher prompted Emilee Fannon to recognize her potential; after completing a school project that entailed producing a radio broadcast, Fannon’s teacher pulled her aside and asked, “Have you ever [thought] of broadcasting? . . . I think you’d be really good at it.” John Powell’s career had a similar start: when the local radio station in Richland Center called his high school principal looking for temporary on-air talent, the principal volunteered Powell, who had distinguished himself in forensics as an extemporaneous speaker. Initially, the mechanics of a radio control room seemed more daunting to Powell than speaking on air—“My first concern was, now what button to push next?”—but after Powell went on air for the first time, in July 1960, he remained in broadcasting for over 40 years.

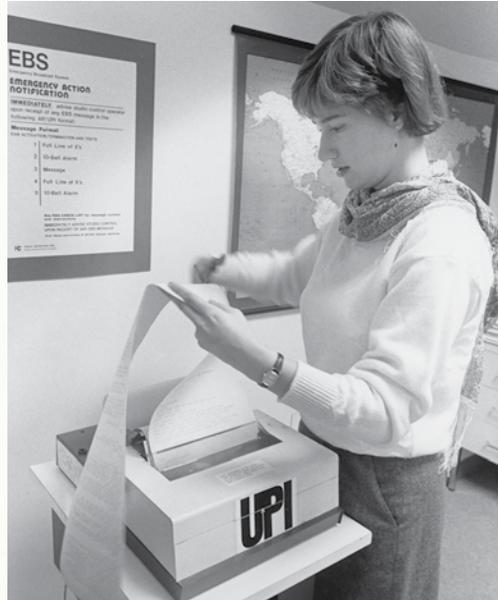
Many interviewees worked at their high school newspapers or radio stations,

and some cut their teeth at local news outlets. Tom Still’s work as an editor for the Mount Vernon High School newspaper won him an opportunity to work as a copy boy at the *Washington Evening Star*, where Still monitored the “wire room,” a space filled with machines from the wire services. As printouts of breaking news from AP, UP, and Reuters spat out of these machines, Still tore them off and delivered them to the appropriate copy-editing desks: “That was just such a great experience to be around reporters and editors.” JR Ross was actively involved in his high school newspaper while also covering sports part time for the local paper. “That’s all I ever wanted to do, is be a journalist,” said Ross. Matt Pommer also began as a sports reporter, covering football for the local weekly because his father forbade him from playing football himself.

Following high school, some reporters earned undergraduate or graduate degrees in journalism. But while acknowledging the importance of coursework, most recalled learning the most from hands-on experience. As JR Ross put it, “My real major was the school paper. I spent thirty-plus hours a week there, on top of class, pretty much the entire time I was in school.” Likewise, Jessie Opoien described devoting more time to the Iowa State student paper than to her classes, and found that covering faculty senate and board of regents meetings prepared her well for covering the legislature. Opoien even convinced some fellow reporters to drive up to Madison during a snowstorm to cover Act 10 protests in early 2011. A.J. Bayatpour aired stories on a student TV station that also served as the local NBC affiliate for Central Missouri: “If it’s bad, somebody forty-five minutes away can see it and call the newsroom and say, ‘What was that? What in the world did I just watch?’ . . . That pressure forces you to perform.”

Interviewees leveraged college experiences like these into paying jobs in journalism. In the late 1960s, Jeff Smoller’s stories for the *Daily Cardinal*, the University of Wisconsin paper, caught the attention of the *Milwaukee Journal*. The paper offered him work covering the campus—especially protests surrounding the Vietnam War and

Several interviewees gained experience in high school through writing their own stories or “ripping and reading” wire service reports from AP or UPI, like this Beloit College student.



other issues—as a “stringer,” a reporter paid per story. “I became a heck of a stringer. By the second year, I became the head correspondent.” Likewise, David Callender joined the *Capital Times* as an intern and subsequently reported for the paper as a suburban stringer, covering local government issues in suburbs such as Middleton, Monona, and Fitchburg.

Many capitol reporters started on the crime beat—the subject area, according to Jessie Opoien, “that every young journalist gets shoved into covering.” Working for the City News Bureau, a Chicago wire service, Lee Bergquist scoured police stations for information: “You would go around every couple of hours and check in with [police officers] and say, ‘Anything going on?’” Molly Beck covered the same beat for a small daily in southern Minnesota, and while there were fewer crimes to report than in Chicago, it was an active and instructive beat. “It taught me a lot about managing my time and being able to turn around stories really quickly, because we had [a] quota: we had to write three stories a day.”

Reporters also honed their skills at smaller newspapers. Amy Rinard gained expertise at the Polk County *Ledger*, for which she covered everything from the circuit court and the county board to deer hunting and snowmobile racing. “You’re the only reporter covering your entire community,” Patrick Marley explained of his time with the *Brookfield News*, “so you’ve got to cover the school board. You’ve got to cover the city council. You’ve got to do profiles. You’ve got to write about businesses. So you have to do everything.” These broad responsibilities helped clarify for Marley the type of stories he enjoyed covering.

Some reporters covered other state legislatures before coming to Madison, but they acknowledged the limits of prior legislative experience. “The spotlight wasn’t so bright,” Scott Bauer remarked of his work in the Nebraska Legislature, where he learned political reporting in a smaller state with more predictable politics. “Once I came [to Wisconsin], that was a whole different level of spotlight.” Walters put it bluntly: “Nobody in this capitol was impressed that I’d covered the Iowa Legislature. I had to prove my ability to cover this place.” Familiarity with the particularities of Wisconsin politics was paramount. Although Steve Schultze became familiar with the legislative process during his time in the Minnesota Legislature, he knew little about the “huge cast of characters” under the capitol dome in Madison. “Yes, you can cover the day-to-day legislation, you can read a bill,” Emilee Fannon noted of her transition to Madison from Springfield, Illinois, “but what happened ten years ago?”

Most members of the press corps described “ad hoc” training, often with no formal introductions to legislators and legislative staff. “You’re putting out a newspaper every day,” Steve Schultze pointed out, “so you don’t really have

time to do a whole lot of that.” Patrick Marley, who arrived at the tail end of the 2003–04 legislative session, observed that “It wasn’t the greatest time to show up. . . . But [I] don’t think there ever is, because . . . you’re dropped in the deep end either way.” Unsurprisingly, interviewees described feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information needed to understand the workings of the capitol. Jessie Opoien and JR Ross both compared their attempts to absorb information to “drinking from a firehose.” Ross took the *Blue Book* home to cram biographical information about legislators while doing laundry: “I knew how to be a journalist, but I didn’t know the ins and outs of the capitol—who the players were.” Others relied on The Wheeler Report or trial subscriptions to WisPolitics. And in addition to scrambling to digest these materials, rookies endeavored to identify and establish relationships with sources who could explain or provide context around certain situations. For Molly Beck, that meant “lots of phone calls.”

Newcomers in any field inevitably blunder, and interviewees shared tales of their most cringeworthy moments. Emilee Fannon mispronounced “Lodi,” which quickly prompted more than a dozen calls to the newsroom: “People were very upset.” Embarrassing incidents often stemmed from ignorance about certain unwritten codes of the “tradition-bound” press corps. In the 1970s and 1980s, newbie reporters provoked consternation when they unwittingly occupied choice seats in the assembly and senate chambers that were unofficially assigned to veteran journalists like AP’s Art Srb—or occupied undesirable seats customarily reserved for less prestigious news outlets. After two weeks with the *Milwaukee Journal*, Steve Schultze recalled, “Somebody took me aside and said, ‘Don’t go sitting over on the other side of the chamber. That’s where the people from the little Podunk papers who show up twice during the session [sit].’” Schultze described feeling sheepish but also thinking the custom a bit “silly.”

Newcomers consequently looked to longstanding members of the press corps as essential mentors. When Dick Jones first covered assembly floor sessions in the 1970s, he sat beside Cliff Behnke of the *Wisconsin State Journal*, who guided him through various confusing customs—“you know, the engrossed votes, the move for reconsideration, and all the parliamentary stuff.” Dick Wheeler played a similar role for several generations of reporters, many of whom described him as a font of knowledge about the Wisconsin State Legislature. “There were many, many, many times,” recalled Scott Bauer, “where I would just turn to Dick and say, ‘Is this important? What does this mean? Can they do that? What is this procedural move?’” Veteran reporters not only demystified legislative maneuvers but also contextualized perennial political issues. Dick Wheeler, Matt Pommer, and Art Srb had “seen it all,” commented David Callender. They could unpack complex

issues like shared revenue or higher education funding, explaining, “This is how they did it the last time,” or “This is why it’s in the mess that it’s in right now.”

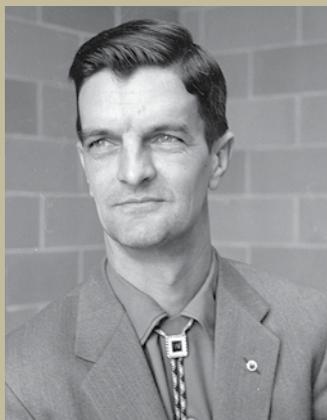
Mentors often provided much-needed morale boosts at times when new reporters felt demoralized. The *Milwaukee Journal’s* Gene Harrington buoyed Stan Milam: “Here I am, I’m nothing,” Milam recalled. “I’m new at the *Janesville Gazette*, which I think was the smallest paper that had a Madison bureau.” Harrington pulled him aside and reassured him, “Kid . . . you’re getting a lot of gas from everybody, but you’ll do just fine.” Milam also described how Neil

Rules of engagement

Until the late twentieth century, the press operated by certain unspoken rules. Among them, any press conference with the governor came to an immediate conclusion when the most senior reporter present said, “Thank you, Governor”—a tradition apparently modeled after White House press corps custom.¹ For many years, John Wyngaard wielded this authority, having covered the capitol for the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* and *Appleton Post-Crescent* from the 1940s onward. How did Wyngaard determine when to utter the magic words? Matt Pommer guessed that Wyngaard interceded after his fellow reporters had questioned the governor on all the major issues of the day and begun to “wander afield into minor things.”

On occasion, another party usurped the senior reporter’s authority, but more often, breaches of custom were accidental rather than intentional. When Stan Milam began covering the capitol for the *Janesville Gazette*, no one apprised him of the tradition. One day, after Art Srb of AP thanked the governor, other reporters rose to leave, but Milam started to interject: “I’m going, ‘Well, I want to—.’” Milam realized that everyone was staring at him. Laughing at the incident in retrospect, he summed up: “You learn those lessons.”

Ultimately, the tradition seemed to have died in the 1990s, in large part due to lack of awareness. As press conferences became larger, expanding beyond a handful of pressroom mainstays, reporters unfamiliar with the unspoken protocol increasingly disregarded it. But Pommer also attributed the shift to Governor Tommy Thompson, who “just kept going” if he decided there was more to say.



John Wyngaard, whose career spanned four decades, became the unofficial steward of capitol press corps traditions.

WHS IMAGE ID 141182

i. Donald A. Ritchie, *Reporting from Washington: The History of the Washington Press Corps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 119–20; Merriman Smith, *Thank You, Mr. President* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 17.

Shively counseled him on how to cover an impossibly broad slate of stories and deadlines: “Calm down. Prioritize.” Shively said, “What if one of the stories didn’t get published? Which one has to get published? Start there.” Those encouragements often meant the difference between soldiering on and bowing out. JR Ross acknowledged that Dick Wheeler kept him afloat during a difficult first year in the capitol, admitting, “I don’t know if I’d have made it without him.”

Over time, fresh reporters gained their footing and established a name for themselves. In some instances, new reporters might benefit from the standing of their news outlet. “People take your phone calls when you’re calling from the AP,” Scott Bauer said. But as he noted, reporters must build their own reputations through their work: “You prove that you’re going to be fair and you’re going to be accurate.” To this end, reporters emphasized the importance of building mutual trust. According to Stan Milam, reporters and public officials followed an unwritten rule in the 1980s and 1990s: “I will never intentionally misquote you or blindside you with something. In exchange, you will never lie to me.” Jason Stein operated by a similar principle, commenting, “Sometimes it’s as simple as just not surprising people.” That means keeping the cover of an anonymous source or refraining from quoting a source who agreed only to speak on background. It might also mean calling the subject of a story to provide advance notice and an opportunity to react. Reporters who fail to meet these standards do so at their peril. “In politics, your word is your currency,” JR Ross explained. “If people can’t trust you, then you don’t have any currency in the building.”

Keeping that currency also demands adherence to strict standards of nonpartisanship. Interviewees described certain basic rules of nonpartisanship: no yard signs, no petitions, no political contributions, and as Scott Bauer put it, “nothing that would give the appearance either in reality or perception that you’re aligned with one side or the other.” As an example, Jason Stein mentioned that he could not become a range safety officer at his gun club because the position required joining the National Rifle Association, an active lobbying organization.

Beyond avoiding partisan affiliations and activities, reporters must refrain from disclosing their opinions on political issues. Journalists are not “robots who don’t have thoughts and feelings and opinions about things,” Jessie Opoien said. The trick is keeping those thoughts, feelings, and opinions private. As an example, a radio interviewer pressed Patrick Marley to share his opinion of Act 10 during the height of the protests around the controversial 2011 legislation. He reacted by saying, “I’m not going to tell you what I think of it. I’m here to tell you that I think it’s important enough for people to know about.” Similarly, JR Ross explained that he relies on phrases like “I hear,” “I understand,” and “people tell



In May 1979, members of the capitol press corps engaged in friendly competition with legislators on the baseball field, with Governor Lee Dreyfus acting as umpire. The Yellow Journalists won 7-1, with Assembly Speaker Ed Jackamonis stealing home for the legislators' sole run.



DUANE SEIDENSTICKER

Social connections

Most interviewees described themselves as uninterested in pursuing social relationships with legislators, staffers, or other sources. As Steve Schultze put it, reporters' relationships with newsmakers are "adversarial" by nature. Still, some reporters enjoyed personal relationships while establishing guardrails. Through the 1980s, for example, a rotating group of politicians and reporters gathered for Friday lunches at the Avenue Bar and various other downtown restaurants. Reporters Matt Pommer, Frank Ryan, Tim Wyngaard, Neil Shively, and Cliff Miller were sometimes present, as were Democratic and Republican politicians, such as Bill Kraus, chief of staff to Governor Lee Dreyfus, and Governor Tony Earl. Participants talked politics, but everything was off the record. Social connections—whether sharing a beer or shooting hoops at a nearby basketball court—did not insulate anyone against unfavorable coverage. "You might have a basketball game one day and a scathing exposé the next," Tom Still recalled.

Off the record

Sometimes, working with sources took on a “cloak and dagger” aspect as reporters attempted to honor sources’ desire for secrecy. David Callender described an instance in which a source agreed to meet with him to confirm details of a story about alleged rifts among justices of the State Supreme Court: “My source agreed to meet me in the stacks of the [State] Law Library, and I passed across the draft of the story in a brown envelope to my source, who was on the other side of the stacks and who then read the story and confirmed each paragraph.” Before he knew it, Callender looked up to an empty space in the stacks: “My source disappeared.”

me” to underscore the fact that he is reporting—rather than opining on—the news. Steve Walters prided himself in keeping his political opinions so close to the vest that even his children remained in the dark.

Once reporters establish a reputation, sources—including lawmakers, legislative staff, and state agency officials—may seek them out with tips and information. As Jason Stein explained, someone with a “track record” on a certain subject knows more about that subject and “will be in a better position to do a good story on it.” For example, because of her extensive and ongoing coverage of the Brewers stadium issue in the early 1990s, Amy Rinard received a call from a state agency official hinting that she should send an open records request for correspondence between his agency and Bud Selig; the correspondence showed that the Brewers expected taxpayers to cover more costs associated with the new stadium than previously understood. Similarly, Jessie Opoien described a “ripple effect” from her reporting on challenges faced by women in politics. On the basis of those stories, she received tips relating to sexual misconduct within the legislature from sources who trusted her with a “really sensitive issue.”

Granted, having a reputation for fairness does not guarantee that legislators will look favorably on a journalist. “You’re a journalist covering politics,” said JR Ross, “so nobody’s ever happy with you 100 percent.” A.J. Bayatpour described a “mutual understanding” that permeates his interactions with legislators: “I’m not this caricature of what they think the media is, and . . . they’re not a caricature of what people might think a politician is.” To maintain that understanding, several reporters said that they welcome legislators to contact them directly with criticism. Patrick Marley said, “I try to take it seriously and see, is there a kernel of truth here? Is there something that I’m not getting at or something I’m missing?” Likewise, Steve Walters described asking himself, “Did I screw this up? Or did I run afoul of somebody’s ego?”

Interviewees stressed that legislators rarely react to their reporting with overt

hostility. John Colbert recalled approaching Representative Walter Ward in 1977 to ask for a statement on allegations that he had improperly claimed telephone expenses. Rather than say “No comment,” Ward kicked Colbert out of his office.¹⁵ Years later, Dick Jones described being “dumbfounded” after Senator Chuck Chvala ran into him on State Street and proceeded to “rip into [him] about some story.” (Senator Mike Ellis happened to be nearby and “took delight” in witnessing the confrontation, prompting Jones to laugh about it himself.) Reporters working more recently described legislators and their staff as avoiding direct confrontations like these: instead, someone holding a grudge might simply ignore or turn down a request for an interview because, as Jessie Opoien reasoned, “We’re Midwestern, right? . . . We don’t ever want to have a fight about it.”

III. The Stories

In their interviews, capitol reporters reflected on their coverage of the biennial legislative session, as well as other stories about the operations of state government. Although some said they preferred covering certain parts of the legislative session, most appreciated the variety involved. “It’s kind of like the change of the seasons,” Scott Bauer explained. And like subzero Wisconsin winters, journalists tolerate “sitting in on the [assembly or senate] floor at three in the morning” only because it is temporary. The months following the passage of the biennial budget are a time to “get your head above water for a second and catch your breath” before returning for fall floor sessions, said A.J. Bayatpour. With the conclusion of the legislative floor period comes the start of election season in the spring of even-numbered years, “and then right around the time when you start getting tired of people trying to get you to write their [opposition] research talking points,” said Jessie Opoien, “it’s time to go back to the legislature.”

Floor sessions are particularly unpredictable. To start, the legislative calendar usually entails frequent delays. David Callender put it this way: “Nine o’clock comes around and nothing happens. And then eleven o’clock, and eleven o’clock becomes one o’clock, and one o’clock becomes three o’clock,” and so on until “they’ve adjourned and nothing has happened.” Even when they start on time, floor sessions may extend late into the night. Reporters described having watched, bleary-eyed, as tempers frayed in the early morning hours. JR Ross recalled a heated debate during which one senator wrenched out a piece of the chief clerk’s AV equipment and threw it to the ground. “You’re trying to describe that,” he recalled, but “You haven’t had any sleep. You’ve been in this room for twenty-four



WHS IMAGE ID 83079

Dick Jones was called up to cover the Menominee Warrior Society's takeover of the Alexian Brothers' Novitiate (Gresham, WI) in January 1975. He expected to be there for a day but stayed for a week. His reporting earned him a banner headline in the *Milwaukee Journal*—and a Marlon Brando sighting.

hours, essentially.” As Jessie Opoien joked, the press endure marathon floor sessions under less-than-ideal conditions: “When they do press conferences in the front of the chamber and we get to sit in the legislators’ seats, I’m like, ‘Well, no wonder you guys can stay here this whole time! This is very comfortable. We have to sit on just wood.’”

Still, journalists conveyed the thrill of watching and reporting on legislative debate. John Colbert said that although his scheduled hours were five in the morning to one in the afternoon, “I found it so interesting, I’d stick around.” At the conclusion of a late-night floor session, he would simply shower and return to the radio station at five to deliver that morning’s newscast. Colbert once brought his teenage daughter Robin for an all-night floor session: “She got the bug right there” and eventually pursued a career in radio news. For Amy Rinard, late floor sessions meant an early morning commute back home to Jefferson County. But, like magic, her stories appeared in print just hours after her return: “By nine or nine thirty, my newspaper gets delivered at my house in my newspaper tube on my driveway. And there’s my story.”

Most reporters described press conferences—in contrast to floor sessions—as being fairly uninteresting and limited in their usefulness. For one thing, the communal nature of a press conference prevents any one reporter from scooping

another. “You asked a question at a news conference,” Tom Still pointed out, “and whatever the answer is, you just shared it with everybody else you’re competing with.” Reporters often attend press conferences for the sake of not missing something, rather than in hopes of “[having] this great story develop in front of your eyes,” Still explained. Nevertheless, reporters try to make the most of press conferences by asking questions intended to derail the speaker. John Colbert shared his delight at “getting people off script,” especially during press conferences that involved a long line of speakers before the designated question-and-answer period. After the first speaker, Colbert would interject, “I’m sorry, I have to leave. But I have one question just to clarify what you said.” His question would invariably prompt a question from another journalist, and “it would just blow up on them.” As Jessie Opoien noted, the “unwritten rule” of press conferences is that for each topic a politician wishes to discuss, reporters will ask about “ten other things.”

Several reporters singled out Matt Pommer as being particularly skilled at “flipping” a press conference, i.e., asking a question that turns the event in an unforeseen direction. *Cap Times* colleague David Callender described how Pommer would “ask a series of very probative questions that . . . create a trap unless you really understand where he is going with them.” Pommer himself recalled a press conference in the mid-1960s at which legislators touted a system of higher education in which professors would primarily teach in lieu of conducting research.¹⁶ “What about Har Gobind Khorana?” Pommer asked, referring to the Nobel Prize-winning University of Wisconsin biochemist. “Do you want him to teach?” The question placed the speaker in a tight spot, at risk of responding in a way that undermined Dr. Khorana’s prestigious work. In another instance, Pommer and Tim Wyngaard of the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* arrived at a meeting of the UW Board of Regents but quickly realized that “there was no news.” So they asked UW President Fred Harrington what he thought about hosting a Packers game at Camp Randall. Harrington’s response—he approved—made the front page of the *Cap Times*, eclipsing any reporting on the meeting itself.¹⁷

As an exception to the rule, several interviewees described how Governor Lee Sherman Dreyfus spoke so unpredictably, and with such roundabout wording, that reporters hung on his every word during press conferences. To start, the governor’s flexibility on certain issues often caught reporters off guard. “If you left his news conference early to meet a deadline,” Dick Jones recalled, “you would run the risk of him perhaps changing his mind later in the news conference and taking a [different position] on what you were writing about.” In addition, Dreyfus was far from straightforward. “[Dreyfus] was a funny man, and he was very quotable,” John Colbert noted, but “he didn’t always say what you thought he said.” John

Powell explained that words that had sounded “perfectly good and wonderful” coming out of the governor’s mouth prompted some head scratching when Powell transcribed them later. Radio reporters like Colbert and Powell were already accustomed to carrying tape recorders, but print reporters adopted them during the Dreyfus administration to sort out the governor’s statements.

Whether covering the legislature or the governor, several interviewees described the importance of doing so in a way that feels relevant to Wisconsinites. “There is always a temptation

to get caught up in the intrigue,” David Callender explained. “[But] you walk out of the building, a block in any direction, and nobody knows who any of these people are. What they care about is, ‘What are you doing, and how is what you’re doing affecting me?’” To this end, when interviewing a legislator on a particular bill, Jessica Arp always asked for an introduction to the person who inspired that bill. She reasoned that the person’s story could bring the legislation to life for her TV audience. Jessie Opoien also said she took pride in stories that demonstrate how legislation touches people’s lives; for example, in the wake of newly enacted laws restricting access to abortion, Opoien spent a day shadowing patients at a Planned Parenthood clinic. “It was eye opening, because you write about these laws in an abstract way of ‘This is what it does.’ But it was just so different to actually see how those laws work in practice.” Although the demands of the job often keep them close to the building, capitol reporters recalled stories like these as highlights.

Interviewees also highlighted stories that exposed problems in state government. David Callender spotlighted his reporting on the Supermax prison in Boscobel, which he pursued through the story of a young car thief who was

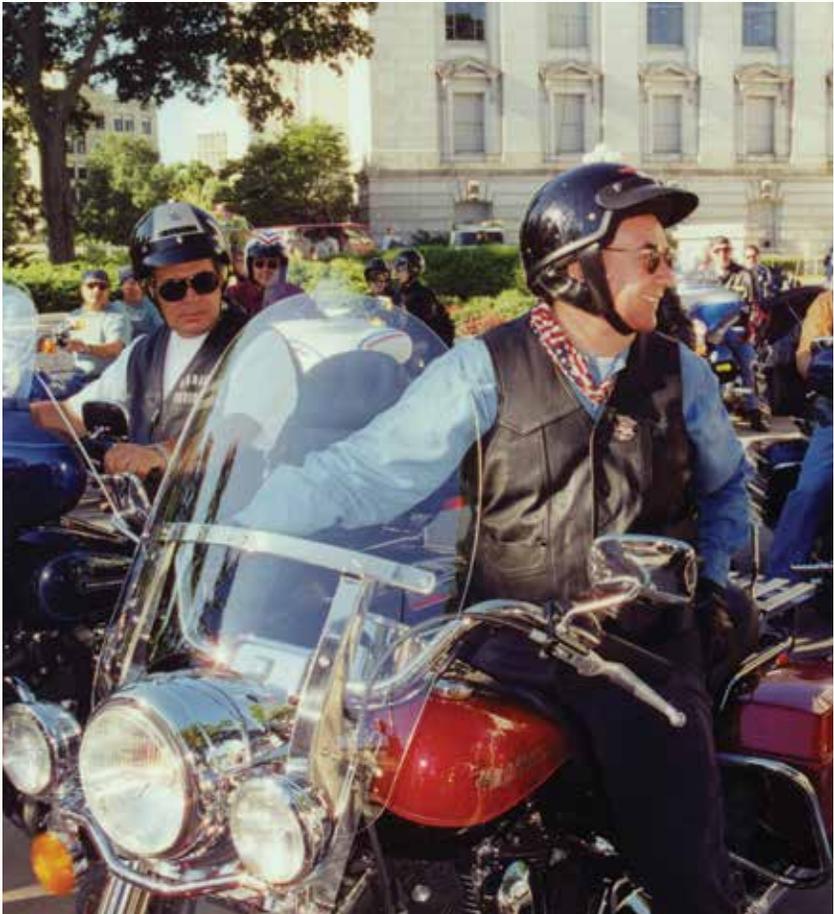


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Among the press, Governor Lee Dreyfus earned a reputation for being unpredictable, engaging, and accessible, welcoming exchanges with reporters rather than shying away from them.

incarcerated under increasingly restrictive conditions there. “We were able to use this kid’s story as symptomatic of many of the problems that were occurring in Supermax,” said Callender, including “the fact that this was an institution that was not built for de-escalating mental health issues.” Reflecting on that story and its aftermath, Callender spoke to the role of journalists in shedding light on the inevitable shortcomings of policy-making. “There’s never going to be a perfect policy,” he conceded. With that in mind, journalists “[enable] folks to understand what’s being done in their name and by their legislators and in their communities, and how those things can be improved or changed.”

Steve Walters convinced his editors at the *Milwaukee Sentinel* to let him cover Governor Thompson’s annual motorcycle tour through Wisconsin, a tradition that began in 1995. Although initially disappointed not to be riding a Harley himself, Walters was relieved to be sitting behind the wheel of his Volkswagen when a downpour soaked Governor Thompson on the first day of the tour.



Likewise, Patrick Marley’s extensive coverage of Lincoln Hills shed light on major problems there. Over the course of several years, Marley spoke with workers, both over the phone and in person at nearby bars, about what they had seen or heard at the juvenile correctional facility. He also took calls from concerned family members who shared details that were otherwise impossible to uncover because juveniles’ records are sealed. At the same time, he requested and sifted through pages upon pages of documents from the Department of Corrections. All these sources provided as many dead ends as decent leads—and a fair amount of pushback from sources themselves. “It’s not something I enjoyed covering,” Marley noted, “but it’s something I’ve felt gratified having covered—that I helped expose some very significant problems.”

Interviewees also expressed gratification and pride in reporting that aimed to keep Wisconsinites informed ahead of elections. In her “Reality Check” series, Jessica Arp dug into claims made in candidates’ campaign ads and speeches, sometimes at the prompting of TV viewers who ran into her at the grocery store: “People wanted to have information to make informed decisions, but the world doesn’t always allow them the time to do that. And they would see these ads on TV and be like, ‘All right, is that really true? Does that guy really hate puppies?’” In one instance, Arp pored over all the cases on a judge’s docket to debunk his claim to have tried a wide variety of violent crime cases. For her part, Jessie Opoien hosted a podcast called “Wedge Issues” ahead of the November 2018 elections, interviewing candidates for state office on key issues. She found that these interviews humanized candidates in a way that helped listeners feel better informed.

IV. The Place

Although plans for the capitol that were drawn up in 1909 contained a dedicated press space, it appears this room, which was adjacent to the assembly parlor, was never used as intended.¹⁸ Reporters remained nomads in the building they covered daily. That ended in 1947, when Senate Joint Resolution 20 provided that Room 204 S, formerly a men’s restroom, be made available “for use as a press room during the 1947 legislative session.” The state would provide surplus tables, chairs, and rugs, and reporters would be held responsible for any damages to the room or its furnishings.¹⁹ This space served as the pressroom until 1971, when reporters relocated to 217 SW, a circular room between the senate and assembly chambers. Later renumbered 235 SW, the same room remains their home base today.²⁰ In their interviews with the LRB, reporters described the pressroom as more than

a physical space; it facilitates effective reporting, encourages connections with elected officials, and creates a sense of community among the press.

Until the 1990s, when the pressroom was remodeled as part of the capitol renovation, the space was cramped and chaotic. Lean back too far, and Steve Walters might collide with fellow *Sentinel* reporter Amy Rinard; open the door too hard, and he might hit Joanne Haas of UPI. Workspaces were separated by partitions “piled high with materials that could easily go up in flames,” making the room a veritable “fire trap.” Reporters’ smoking habits—from Stan Milam’s cigarettes to Neil Shiveley’s cigars and Dick Wheeler’s pipe—only exacerbated the problem. “Everybody smoked,” Milam recalled. “It was a cloud in there.” Ultimately, 1999 Wisconsin Act 72 prohibited smoking in the state capitol building, although most reporters had ceased smoking inside by that time.

Heat posed another significant hazard. Before air conditioning was installed in the early 1990s, the pressroom would become sweltering, especially as the afternoon sun poured in through the tall windows. Amy Rinard would escape to the State Law Library, just above the State Supreme Court chambers, to bask in its air conditioning. Art Srb reportedly tried to beat the heat with a large, loud, and unwieldy oscillating fan nicknamed the Gerald Lorge Memorial Fan after the longtime (and, at the time, still very much alive) state senator. Stan Milam remembered one especially hot day when everyone in the pressroom was struggling to file stories on deadline. “All of a sudden,” he recounted, “Art starts screaming . . .



COURTESY OF THE SHIVELY FAMILY

Many interviewees cited Neil Shiveley as a top-notch reporter, a key mentor, and a source of levity in the pressroom.

Friendly wagers

During Neil Shiveley’s tenure in the capitol press corps, the pressroom hosted an annual election pool. One day, a chart would appear in the pressroom, and journalists and legislative aides would submit a dollar each to join. Participants bet on winners and winning vote percentages in a handful of key legislative districts. WPR’s John Powell fondly recalled the year he came out on top with \$24 and “bragging rights.” Of course, pool participants took some flack for their positions. In 1986, Stan Milam voted against the likelihood of Tommy Thompson winning the governorship and never heard the end of it from Thompson.

[T]he Gerald Lorge Memorial Fan had caught his pant leg! And it was eating up his trousers! And Art is kicking this thing, and he’s still typing. He had a deadline. So he’s fighting off the Gerald Lorge Memorial Fan and typing at the same time.”

A hodgepodge of surplus and scavenged furniture reinforced the pressroom’s chaotic atmosphere. “Before the capitol renovation, the furniture looked like what’s on the curb at hippie Christmas,” John Powell said, referring to the profusion of castoff furniture in Madison every year at the end of student leases. Amy Rinard recalled working on a green metal World War II–era typist’s desk, flanked by another colleague’s ancient, oversized wooden desk and a TV stand that housed the *Sentinel’s* telephone and answering machine. Over time, reporters developed a knack for “scavenging furniture from the hallways.” To Powell, the atmosphere was a point of pride: “Some of us . . . were really proud of it. That we were not feathering our nests . . . [and] that this was basically hand-me-down furniture and a place to work, which is the image that I think most of us wanted to project.” Since the capitol renovation, the room now boasts uniform desks and chairs, but retains a lived-in feel: “Reporters are not the neatest,” Jason Stein conceded. “It’s not like an army barracks in terms of being spick-and-span.”

Many reporters told the LRB that the pressroom—rather than their outlet’s offices or newsroom—served as their home base. As Jason Stein put it, “I tried to be at the capitol more because I felt that that was where I . . . would be most likely to learn news relating to state government.” Long before they became available online, legislative materials—from press releases to service agency reports—would be printed and delivered to pressroom mailboxes. Amy Rinard associated certain sounds with Legislative Fiscal Bureau reports: “They’d go *thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk*. . . . And you’d go, ‘Oh, that sounds like news.’”

Working from the pressroom also granted reporters, especially those from the Milwaukee outlets, an opportunity to work independently from their editors. Steve Schultze explained that while *Journal* editors frequently telephoned, “You felt like you were more on your own and didn’t have people breathing down your neck.” Amy Rinard agreed: at a substantial distance from the *Sentinel* newsroom, “you couldn’t be micromanaged.”

Autonomy from editors came at the cost of unpredictability because, as Rinard put it, “That room was everybody’s room. And whatever was going on in there, we weren’t in charge of it.” Legislators and cabinet secretaries sometimes appeared in their workspace without warning. One day, Rinard was finishing a story on deadline when Governor Thompson and Department of Administration Secretary Jim Klauser entered the pressroom, armed with “a handful of tiny plastic shot glasses and a bottle of . . . Schnapps or something.” She had filed and sent



PHOTO COURTESY OF AMY RINARD

After months reporting from the capitol basement, Amy Rinard (*left*) and Joanne Haas (*right*) admire a plaque commemorating the 1998 budget provision granting the press future use of their second-floor space.

Safeguarding the pressroom

In 1995, the capitol press corps found itself temporarily relegated to the basement, and some feared they might remain there indefinitely. Dick Wheeler, head of the Capitol Correspondents Association, accused senate leaders of having “no intention of ever providing working facilities for the media on the second floor again” and made it his mission to counter their plans.¹ “He was very, very protective of the pressroom,” Stan Milam recalled, noting its strategic location between the senate and assembly chambers. By contrast, the windowless basement offices were difficult to access and left reporters with no sense of whether it was day or night.

Wheeler began to lobby informally for the press’s return to 217 SW and found an opening during a chance encounter with Mark Bugher, the secretary of administration under Governor Tommy Thompson. Wheeler and David Callender were eating their lunches outside the capitol when Bugher spotted them and asked if there was anything he could do for them, whereupon Wheeler launched into the predicament with respect to press workspace. His initiative paid off: weeks later, the Department of Administration included the following language among changes requested to the governor’s budget repair bill: “The circular room on the 2nd floor of the capitol located between the assembly and senate chambers shall be made available for the use of the capitol press corps.” With the enactment of 1997 Wis. Act 237 in June 1998, this language was codified under Wis. Stat. § 16.835. “It wasn’t that we were necessarily doing it for ourselves,” Callender recalled. Instead, the statutory provision recognized the role of the press in providing Wisconsinites with a direct point of access to their government.

i. Doug Moe, “Press Corps Can’t Go Much Lower,” *Capital Times*, August 31, 1998.



PHOTO COURTESY OF AMY RINARD

Governor Tommy Thompson and Senator Chuck Chvala join the festivities at the reopening of the pressroom following capitol renovations in the mid-1990s. Thompson and members of his cabinet visited frequently, creating an atmosphere of spontaneity.

her story when an editor called with a question. Upon hearing “raucous noise” in the background, the editor asked, “Are you in a tavern?” to which she replied: “Well, no . . . I’m in the capitol pressroom.”

Still, most interviewees cited that spontaneity as a benefit instead of a downside. For decades, the pressroom has enabled in-person interaction between reporters and policymakers. As Steve Walters put it, “When a cabinet secretary is angry at what just happened at joint finance and she or he walks into the pressroom, it’s an instant news conference.” Working from the pressroom might also mean running into legislative leaders on the way to or from the restroom—or sampling the spoils of Representative Joel Kleefisch’s latest hunting trip.

In addition to access to lawmakers, interviewees cited the pooled expertise of the press corps as another benefit of working from the pressroom. Several recent reporters described their colleagues in the press corps as an essential sounding board. “We kind of have each other’s backs,” Scott Bauer explained, answering questions like, “Hey, did that ruling say what I thought it did? Am I understanding this correctly?” Sometimes, cooperation might mean putting Legislative Fiscal Bureau Director Bob Lang on speakerphone to gain clarity on a difficult-to-understand budget provision. This kind of collaboration prompts some reporters from different outlets to consider each other as colleagues. “To me,” Molly Beck commented, “it

feels like a regular newsroom, even though we don't technically work with each other." On session days, reporters even coordinate coffee runs and takeout orders.

Still, this spirit of camaraderie has its limits, as Beck acknowledged, "We're competitors at the end of the day." Or, as Scott Bauer put it, "If I get a hot tip, I'm not going to be like, 'You won't believe what I just heard from [Speaker] Robin Vos.'" And as many interviewees acknowledge, keeping information from competitors poses one of the great challenges of working from the pressroom. "We're in a round room with a high ceiling, and everything bounces," David Callender explained. "You're going to hear each other's phone calls." Callender operated on the principle that a reporter should not act on an overheard scoop—but he and other reporters took no chances that a scoop *could* be overheard. "There used to be a pay phone down on the ground floor of the capitol, and you would go to the pay phone to call the [newsroom] desk and let them know what you had coming." Former *Milwaukee Sentinel* bureau chief Steve Walters agreed that fierce competition necessitated covert phone calls from the first-floor pay phone: "It was a close-knit community. But when I was paid according to how often I beat the *Journal*, you just couldn't share any secrets in there."

Technological advances have eased this problem a bit. Jason Stein spelled out a hypothetical in which a reporter receives a tip about an amendment poised to break a budget impasse: "Now you could send an email, you could call by cell phone in the hall, you could Slack them, whatever. There's a million ways to do it." But efforts to maintain privacy can be unsettling. Jessie Opoien mentioned how hushed conversations between former *Journal Sentinel* reporting partners Jason Stein and Patrick Marley would prompt her gnawing curiosity: "They would just get really quiet. And I'd be like, 'What are they doing? What do they have? . . . What am I going to have to chase later today?'"

V. Challenges and Rewards

Some reporters told the LRB they could not imagine doing anything else, and some now do other work, including public relations and policy research. Although their career trajectories differed, all interviewees emphasized the challenges that come with the job of covering the legislature, including both the practical (e.g., struggling against technology to submit stories) and the personal (e.g., missing out on family events due to long hours at the capitol). But the richness of the capitol beat, interviewees were quick to note, can compensate for these stressors and sacrifices.

Before the rise of the Internet, reporters faced a host of technical challenges

in submitting stories to their editors. In the late 1960s, the Badger Bus sometimes shepherded *Milwaukee Journal* stories from Madison to Milwaukee. Jeff Smoller recalled running to the bus station with carbon copies that would be picked up in Milwaukee and set in type overnight. Alternatively, reporters would dictate stories over the phone: “So you would get your information, you’d organize it in your head . . . and you’d dictate that to a rewrite person in Milwaukee, who would take down what you were saying and clean it up.” In fact, some reporters stockpiled quarters on the off chance they might need to call in a story from a pay phone outside the capitol. Dick Jones recalled receiving an early morning call instructing him to cover the Barneveld tornado in 1984. On top of “getting there and finding out what happened [and] interviewing people,” he faced one additional challenge: “to find a pay phone and then to hope to God that [I] had the change for it.”

The adoption of Tandy computers during the late 1970s and 1980s introduced new frustrations. Although the Tandy resembled a laptop, its memory was limited and its screen was miniscule. Plus, Lee Bergquist noted, “If you hit the button just wrong, you’d wipe out everything.” If a reporter managed to successfully type out a story, sending it to the newsroom required the use of an acoustic coupler, a device that transmitted text over phone lines. These transmissions sent at a glacial pace—and were notoriously unreliable. Steve Schultze pointed out: “You’d send it and sort of pray that it got there intact. And then you had to call your editor immediately and say, ‘Did you get it? Did you get the story?’ And they’d open it up, and they’d go, ‘Oh, it’s all garbled. Resend it.’” Technical difficulties like these meant that anyone strolling past the doors of the pressroom might be privy to “a lot of profanity.”

By the 1990s, technology became more predictable, but the news industry became less so, and a handful of outlets closed their capitol bureaus, consolidated with rivals, or cut staff. Over the course of the 1980s, UPI struggled against increasing competition from television news outlets and the gradual decline of local newspapers that had been loyal subscribers.²¹ The wire service filed for bankruptcy in 1985, by which time its capitol reporters

In the 1970s and 1980s, many reporters wrote and transmitted stories on Tandy computers. Like this model from the same era, the Tandy had a small screen and operated slowly.



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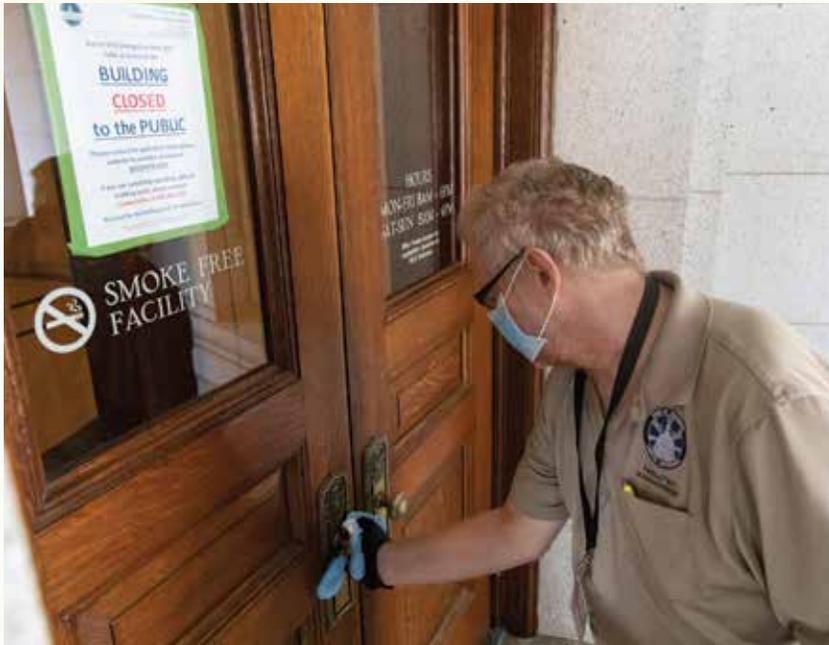
were regularly receiving late or bounced paychecks in what one reporter called “an agonizing nightmare.”²² The bureau shuttered in October 1990.²³

Around the same time, print news also faltered. In response to declining circulation, newspapers across the country consolidated, including two former competitors in the capitol pressroom, the *Milwaukee Journal* and the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. Most reporters the LRB interviewed described this merger, which occurred in 1995, as sudden, unexpected, and seismic. “Maybe we were just in denial,” the *Journal*’s Dick Jones reflected. “I can remember [Neil] Shively saying ‘There will always be two papers.’ Well, the day came when there [weren’t].” After years of competing with each other for scoops, capitol reporters from the newspapers found themselves reapplying for jobs as colleagues at the merged *Journal Sentinel*. A pervasive sense of uncertainty and distrust made the merger period particularly stressful.

Newspaper consolidation continued throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, with some outlets downsizing their capitol bureaus and others closing them altogether. The *Janesville Gazette*, for example, closed its one-man capitol bureau following the 1997 legislative session in a decision that “blindsided” Stan Milam, who said he “thought the capitol bureau was an important part of the paper.” Other papers, such as the *Journal Sentinel*, retained their capitol bureaus but offered periodic buyouts to their reporters during this period in an effort to cut staff. Since then, the *Journal Sentinel*, like most other papers, has relied on fewer journalists to report on the same volume of news. In consequence, said Patrick Marley, “I have less time. Editors have less time. All my colleagues have less time.”

By the early 2000s, the spread of the Internet intensified the existing pressure to report breaking news quickly—now within minutes or even seconds. When Scott Bauer started at AP in the 1990s, deadlines punctuated his day, beginning midmorning with deadlines for the afternoon papers. More than twenty years later, “We don’t even think about deadlines anymore because everything just goes out everywhere instantaneously.” Posting stories this rapidly requires pre-writing as much background information as possible; then, the moment news breaks, there is a mad scramble to synthesize and incorporate that news. As an example, Patrick Marley described the morning Michael Gableman announced the release of his report on the 2020 presidential election: “I’m trying to listen to what he says, get a sense of what’s going on in the room, and also read a 130-page report.” Meanwhile, Marley’s colleague Molly Beck was off site doing the same, and the pair was in constant communication with their editors.

Although interviewees classified social media as an effective tool, especially as a means to promote their work and that of their peers, many also characterized



JOE KOSHOLLEK, LEGISLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHER

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic prompted reporters to relocate from the capitol pressroom to their homes, creating distinct advantages and disadvantages.

Adapting during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic proved challenging for many capitol reporters because it distanced them from the pressroom and limited their access to public officials. According to Scott Bauer, “[The pandemic] cut down on the personal one-on-one interaction with people.” More interactions took place over the phone or via Zoom, making it difficult to build relationships and taking some of the thrill out of reporting. Still, interviewees noted some silver linings. For one thing, politicians’ increasing familiarity with Zoom meant TV reporters like Emilee Fannon and A.J. Bayatpour snagged a “wider breadth” of interviewees who might have otherwise been unavailable for an in-person interview. Additionally, reporters conceded the distinct advantages of covering floor sessions from the comfort of home, which met with approval from their household pets.

it as a source of stress. Jessica Arp described Twitter as having “amplified by a thousand times” the pressure for her to be following and reporting on the news on a “wake-up-to-go-to-sleep” basis. In a similar vein, Jason Stein remarked, only half-jokingly, that Twitter had “ruined his brain” by making him less able to focus on real conversations. More concerning, reporters described how social media enables abuse and harassment. Patrick Marley noted, “[People] forget that at the

other end of the screen is another human being.” As a result, they type things in Twitter messages that “they would be horribly embarrassed if their mother or spouse found out about.” Reporters stressed both the virulence and volume of online harassment, which Molly Beck called “jarring.” In response, most reporters emphasized the necessity of developing a thick skin—or finding humor in the absurd. “It would just crack me up.” A.J. Bayatpour told the LRB that, in response to one segment, “I would literally get an email or a Twitter message . . . saying I’m in Governor Evers’s pocket . . . [and another saying] this Bayatpour guy, he’s just a Republican.”

Paradoxically, while social media has facilitated unrestrained communication between the press and the public, several veteran reporters told the LRB that it had the opposite effect within the capitol; specifically, legislators no longer rely on reporters to reach the public because they can do so directly via Twitter or Facebook. As a result, in-person and telephone interviews with the press are lower priorities than before. “Twenty years ago,” JR Ross explained, “we had an interview, and I got a live quote to put in my story. About ten [or] twelve years ago, I called your office, and I [got] a statement from you. Now, either I get a statement or I get a tweet.” Steve Walters agreed, commenting that reporters are less likely to break a story from an interview with an elected official and more likely to react to a social media post. The downside of this shift, to Ross, is that quotes pulled from conversation sound substantially different from statements or tweets.

On a practical level, interviewees described political reporting as a career that requires long hours and constant attention, to the detriment of personal relationships. More than one reporter relied on the word “consuming” to characterize not only the time commitment but also the “constant need to know what’s happening.” On top of demanding fifty-to-sixty-hour workweeks, reporters described even longer hours at the close of a floor session or during major events, such as the protests surrounding Act 10 in early 2011. Some felt that they disappointed loved ones as a result. As Emilee Fannon put it, “Campaign season, I have missed weddings, I have missed friends’ birthdays, because I just feel . . . obligated to go to the Trump rally.” Similarly, Steve Walters commented, “You cheat your families and people that love you.”

In addition to these personal sacrifices, reporters also described the mental and emotional toll of covering certain kinds of stories. As Steve Walters explained, he and other *Journal Sentinel* colleagues reported on certain general assignment stories on a rotating basis. These stories cast their reporting on the legislature in sharp relief. “They make hugely important decisions in that building,” Walters said, gesturing to the capitol, “but then you go to the site of a fire where three children



JOE KOSHOLLEK, LEGISLATIVE PHOTOGRAPHER

Social media

Although several interviewees told the LRB that Twitter is a source of stress, Jessie Opoien said she appreciates how it creates unexpected connections within the capitol. Soon after she began reporting on the legislature, Opoien tweeted about the television show *The Bachelorette*, prompting Representative Jim Steineke to approach her and commiserate about the contestant’s decision: “[He] was like, I can’t believe she sent him home last night.”

Jessie Opoien of the *Capital Times* has forged connections with legislators through social media.

perished, and . . . it’s a heck of a balance, emotionally.” Stan Milam also emphasized that most reporters cover “unpleasant” topics, tempting them to become cynical. He recalled how Gene Harrington of the *Milwaukee Journal* cautioned against this tendency, advising colleagues, “Get the facts and report them. But don’t go in with . . . a negative attitude.” But Milam admitted to the difficulty of following Harrington’s advice: “It’s so hard to be in this business and not be cynical. It’s almost like your job is to make sure that somebody isn’t pulling the wool over your eyes.”

Still, many interviewees spoke of journalism as a calling—one to which they felt inexorably bound, despite its many challenges. “I was made to be a reporter,” said Lee Bergquist. “It just suits who I am.” Likewise, although he has since worked in another field, Dick Jones described himself as “a reporter at heart.” For Stan Milam, no other career was conceivable: “I can write a 600-word story. That’s about it. . . . And if I had to go out and make a living doing something else, I’d probably starve to death.” Although offered in jest, Milam’s comment underscores the extent to which reporting requires a special combination of skills and interests.

For individuals who possess those skills and interests, the capitol is “the richest beat you can get,” remarked John Powell, emphasizing the extent to which capitol reporters engage directly with policymakers. Similarly, Patrick Marley described covering the state legislature as a “dream job” because of this “incredible access” to lawmakers, especially compared to the U.S. Congress. “You can catch them in the hallway. You can stop by their offices. You can really get to the bottom of

what's going on and what's on their minds." John Colbert likewise described interactions with legislators as "one of the best parts of the job." Equally motivating is the fact that reporters cover issues that range widely and change constantly. "Just about any subject you can think of will come eventually, in some form, before the state legislature or the courts," Powell explained. And reporters engage their intellectual curiosity by digging into all these subjects. As JR Ross noted, "You become an expert—for at least a day—on so many topics." In the process, reporters regularly interact with legislative staff and agency officials who broaden their understanding of various issues. Jason Stein, for example, described himself as being fortunate to "sit at the feet of very knowledgeable people, like [Legislative Fiscal Bureau Director] Bob Lang."

No two days are the same for a capitol reporter. "That's what makes the job so great and interesting," remarked Scott Bauer. "Even though you're covering the statehouse, all the characters, all the issues . . . are always kind of in flux." Accordingly, the work is never predictable or boring. Molly Beck put it this way: "There's never been a time I've looked up and [said], 'Oh man, it's only one o'clock' you know? I've *never* had that feeling—ever." Jessie Opoien likewise described her job satisfaction as being directly tied to the diversity of issues on the capitol beat, noting wryly, "I'll leave when it stops being interesting."

For these reasons and more, the rewards of covering the capitol soften its challenges. "It gives to you more than it takes away," commented Jason Stein. Amy Rinard shared a similar vantage point: "It was stressful work. We were under the microscope all the time. But that was a great place to work." In large part, the camaraderie of the pressroom motivated Rinard and others to persist in telling important stories about the work of the legislature and its effect on Wisconsinites.

Conclusion

When Senate Majority Leader Ernest Keppler handed over the keys to the new pressroom in 1971, he offered the following words: "A representative form of government, to succeed, is dependent on the members of the press to inform citizens of actions by their representatives." The pressroom, he hoped, would aid the press in its mission.²⁴ Those who have served in the capitol press corps over the intervening fifty years articulate their mission in similar terms. "You're there as a representative of the people," Dick Jones remarked. "You're there in their stead [and] that is vital in the way government works." Gwyn Guenther agreed: "They call the press the Fourth Estate because the public needs to keep an eye on its



Members of the capitol press corps are formally presented with a key to the pressroom in 1998. Dick Wheeler's struggle for a dedicated pressroom reflected a broader mission to ensure Wisconsinites' access to their elected officials.

government.”²⁵ That principle animated her father's fight to keep the pressroom, which was posthumously renamed the Dick Wheeler Press Room in his honor.

And while the challenges of the job can prove wearying, many reporters described covering the capitol as a great privilege. As Scott Bauer put it, “You make a lot of great friends, and you see a lot of things that other people don't get to see, and you have an opportunity to tell the world what is going on.” Jessica Arp described feeling a “sense of awe” looking at the capitol illuminated at night, even after a long and exhausting day: “There's this sense of history that . . . I don't think you get in any office setting.” **BB**

NOTES

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2. Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 3.
3. Oehlerts, *Guide to Wisconsin Newspapers*, vi.
4. See, generally, Richard Schwarzlose, “The Associated Press and United Press International,” in Philip S. Cook, *The Future of News: Television, Newspapers, Wire Services, Newsmagazines* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1992), 145–76.
5. Donald A. Ritchie, *Reporting from Washington: The History of the Washington Press Corps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 111, 114.

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8. Ritchie, *Reporting from Washington*, 46.
9. See, generally, "Radio Voices" in Ritchie, *Reporting from Washington*.
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14. Jessie Opoien, "Q&A: Gwyn Guenther Covers the Wisconsin Capitol for Political Insiders," *Capital Times*, August 20, 2017.
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19. Senate Joint Resolution 20, *Senate Journal* (1947), 209.
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