



## PRESS CORPS

### Committee Guide

By Max Chalfin

#### Introduction

Wielding the mighty power of the pen, HMCE reporters shape delegates' perceptions of conference events. The Press Corps gives reporters a chance not only to observe, but also to evaluate conference events in shrewd **editorials** and analyses which appear in our daily newspaper, the *HMCE Times*. We will explore the great responsibility that comes with this opportunity, studying and discussing the way the media can influence the news as well as report it.

In a three-day period, you will experience the energy and excitement of a Washington newsroom. Over the course of the conference, the technical details of reporting — gathering evidence, writing stories and developing sources — will become second nature. We will help you use the conference to develop your analytical and writing skills, and to tackle the complex issue of journalistic ethics. Your energy and dedication will produce their own rewards as your efforts culminate in the publication of each issue of the *HMCE Times*. The HMCE Press Corps team will function in the dual roles of a newspaper editorial board and investigative reporters. Our mission is to produce a daily newspaper that will serve not only as a record of events at HMCE 2009, but also as a vehicle by which to learn about the unique role of the media in the political arena. The information we gather will test our ability to objectively report, and the often immediate effect of stories on the actions of committees will demonstrate the subtle power wielded by the media. The *HMCE Times* will therefore need to reflect not only your skills at thoroughly and accurately gathering information, but also a capacity to report fairly on all sides of an issue.

**Editorial**—an article in a newspaper that expresses the opinions of the editor or writer.

#### Procedure

##### *Playing Your Role*

Because the press plays such an essential role in American public activity, it can be used to flavor public opinion for or against a person or policy. Understandably, the press itself has become heavily politicized and, while journalists are required on one hand to remain impartial, distinct political leanings can be found in all forms of media. Journalists can increase their readership by appealing to majority political ideals, and often the reporting is influenced by public opinion, even though reporting provides the information which supposedly forms

those opinions. The *New York Times*, for example, is often seen as a left-leaning newspaper, while The *Wall Street Journal* tends to have a more conservative perspective. Even though different publications cater to different sides of the aisle, both Republicans and Democrats accuse the media of favoring the other side, and therefore of needlessly attacking their own people and ideas. Many liberals criticize Fox News for its war mongering before the Iraq invasion, and its subsequent jingoistic reporting on the war, refusing to report the number of American casualties, or repeatedly showing images of Iraqis toppling statues of Saddam Hussein. Likewise, conservative pundits such as Rush Limbaugh barely breathe a sentence without accusing the “liberal media” of distorting the truth to promote liberal politics. At our conference, each of you will be assigned the identity of a famous personality in the American media. Several will be contemporary reporters and some will be famous figures from American history. It is your job to understand the political leanings, as well as the journalistic style, of your roles and to act throughout the conference in a manner befitting their legacies.

### *On Your Beat*

Before the conference, you will receive a **beat** assignment. You can prepare for this beat before the conference. A beat is the term members of the media use to refer to the areas a specific reporter covers. Your beat will comprise a particular program, such as the National Security Council, the Senate, or the Group of Eight. Each reporter will be required to write approximately three articles about his or her beat. Much of your time at HMCE will be spent observing the committee which is the focus of your beat, recording key events within the committee, talking to key players about their plans and strategies, and studying any legislation passed by that body.

You will soon be receiving a beat sheet that you can use to indicate your beat assignment preference. To determine your preference, examine each committee’s briefings in the HMCE 2009 briefing book. Carefully consider which beat covers the issues that interest you most, as these issues will determine the focus of your research and writing. Most HMCE committees use a form of **parliamentary procedure**. You can start preparing even before you receive your beat by reading the procedure section of the Guide to Congress and familiarizing yourself with language of parliamentary procedure so that you can follow events in committee. You should know what it means when a senator makes a motion, yields time to the chair, or uses other parliamentary parlance.

Once you have your beat, begin reading the briefings for that committee and research the topics they will be discussing. Remember that it is your job to be well versed on all sides of these issues, so don’t stop at the briefing. Go out and research on your own and find out what may have been left out of the briefings. You must be prepared to do in-

**Beat**—the specific area that a reporter is assigned to cover; for example, National Security Council or Senate

**Parliamentary Procedure**—the rules of conduct that congressional committees and many international treaty summits use to ensure that there is an organized process whereby members can submit legislation and participate in orderly debate.

sightful, informed reporting upon your committee and its issues at HMCE 2009.

### *In the Newsroom*

Each day, the Press Corps will observe the conference, gathering facts and ferreting out scandals and breaking news. Armed with this information, the team will gather as a board of editors, discussing each story and deciding how best to report on it. These meetings will take the form of structured, and often heated, debates. The input from other members of the editorial board will help guide reporters in the next stage of the newspaper work, actually writing the articles.

### *Practicing the Craft*

Every member of the Press Corps will write and edit articles, eventually helping to lay them out in each issue of the HMCE Times. Over the course of the conference, we will discuss how to write thoughtful and interesting articles. News articles are very different from most expository writing, and we will learn about the use of “**ledes**,” quotations, attributed facts, and the appropriate language for reporting. Putting this knowledge into practice, reporters will write articles. Subsequently, you will edit your own articles as well as your colleagues’ work, ensuring effective and accurate journalistic writing. You will be equipped with note pads—make sure to get accurate quotes for articles. This is the number one rule of professional journalism: don’t misquote.

**Lede**—an interesting, catchy opening to a story that gives readers essential information and draws them in to read more.

## **Focus of the Press**

Given the wide variety of topics covered in the different committees, each reporter will have a unique focus. While acting as the editorial board, however, the members of the Press Corps will primarily concern themselves with issues of journalistic ethics. When considering journalistic ethics, it is necessary to distance one’s self away from the actual content of an article to address broader questions. Do public figures have the right to private lives? Does reporting on violent acts encourage more destructive behavior? Does reporting on state secrets constitute an act of treason, or is it simply an exercising of the public’s right to information? Is it ethical for a newspaper to break a story about a congressman’s corrupt behavior even if it will take the public’s focus off very important legislation?

These are just a few of the kinds of questions that will be raised in our editorial meetings. Answering them will demand more than simply a command of the facts behind the news, but also an understanding of the way the public and the government respond to news stories, as well as a carefully thought out philosophy on the role of media in soci-

ety. The editorial board will be responsible for establishing difficult newspaper policy, such as allowing reporters to publish a quotation attributed to an anonymous source, or determining the number of sources needed to reliably confirm an allegation. Be prepared to take a stance on these kinds of questions and thoroughly defend it. Each reporter will use different methods of research and writing depending on his or her beat. Consider which committee would make you feel the most comfortable, and which type of issues interest you the most.

## Writing for the Paper

The HMCE Press Corps will publish a daily paper, the *HMCE Times*, which will include both hard news and human-interest opinion pages. News and opinion articles will have different writing styles. We would like each reporter to write three stories for the *Times* and one opinion story during the conference. The *Times* is modeled after the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Each article will include detail and quotes from several sources. The *Times* news and opinion articles should be long enough to include analysis.

### *Journalistic Ethics*

What caused the car crash that killed Princess Diana? Did the behavior of the White House Press Corps during the Monica Lewinsky scandal weaken the office of the President of the United States? Has the media's acquiescence to the Bush Administration's requests for voluntary  **censorship**  in the interests of security compromised journalism? Before you answer these questions, it is important to consider the ethical questions that journalists must ask themselves every day.

Three ethical questions will figure into your reporting at HMCE. The first, which is exemplified by both Princess Diana's death and the Lewinsky scandal, concerns the difference between public and private lives. Do public figures have fewer claims to privacy than average citizens? Did the American media have the right to fuel speculation about a president's personal life because he is at the helm of the nation? Even if you decide that journalists have that right — tabloids have been doing so for years — you need to decide the limits you feel comfortable placing on your own reporting.

The United Kingdom's Princess Diana died in a car crash in August 1997. As a woman who led most of her adult life under public scrutiny, she died while being pursued by photographers eager for a scoop. Most people now ask if the public's hunger for personal details about the lives of public figures has become so ravenous as to be destructive. Is it ethical to publish everything the public wants to know? The second question is how many sources you need before you can publish a story.

**Censorship**—the suppression of speech or deletion of communicative material which may be considered objectionable, harmful or sensitive.

When two young *Washington Post* reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, uncovered evidence incriminating members of President Richard Nixon's staff in an attempt to cover up illegal activities, they were told not to publish it. The information had been confirmed by "**Deep Throat**," a source in the President's administration. Woodward and Bernstein were confident that Deep Throat was "in a position to know," but the *Post*'s editor Ben Bradlee made them get confirmation from another source before publishing the story that led to Nixon's resignation.

Good reporters face this confirmation problem frequently. The central issue is how many and what kinds of sources you need in order to make a news story printable. The answer depends on what type of story you are reporting. For an event you attend, such as a congressional debate, you need no source other than yourself. To report a quote from a public figure, you can take notes or use notes from another reliable reporter. News of a controversial nature, however, should be confirmed by more than one source. For example, if you hear the National Council is planning to bomb a terrorist camp, you should definitely seek confirmation. Also consider the biases of your sources. Do they have any bones to pick? Are different parties or political opponents spreading potentially damaging rumors? You should always make a source's background clear by listing party affiliation and position.

If a source refuses to be identified, make sure there is a good reason. If you are speaking with a source that refuses to be identified, you have several options. Explain to the source that he or she can go "off the record." Information you receive off the record can only be used to inform your other interviews and prompt sources to give you "on-the-record" information. You can use an off-the-record comment to confirm facts given by another source. Never reveal the source for information you received off the record. You can also conduct an interview "on background." You can publish information that you receive on background, but cannot attribute it to your source by name. You and the source will have to agree on a designation. HMCE editors will accept such designations as "a Republican senator" or "a member of the US delegation to the summit." We will not publish information provided by "a source in a position to know."

Common sense dictates that sources with a particular interest in an issue are not always reliable informants. Know a source's biases and weed out the best version of the truth between competing points of view. The more sources, the more sides, the better. Do not be afraid to provide your editors with too much information. We will help you weave it into a meaningful story.

The final ethical issue, and one that has come up at HMCE in the past, involves the conflict between state secrets and the public's right to information. According to the First Amendment of the US Constitution,

**Deep Throat**—the famous anonymous source in the Watergate scandal, which revealed efforts by President Richard Nixon and his staff to conceal illegal activities.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” It applies to state and local **statutes** in addition to the federal government. The Supreme Court has generally favored with the press’s right to publish information obtained legally. In 1971, for example, the Nixon Administration brought a suit against *The New York Times* to stop it from publishing the Pentagon Papers, a secret study about the war in Vietnam that revealed deceptions by the government and indicated it had prolonged the war. The government obtained a temporary restraining order on their publication, arguing that release of the documents would endanger national security. The Court ruled that the government does not have the right to halt publication, especially in this case when the material did not seem likely to jeopardize national security.

**Statute**—a law.

Thus, newspapers are left to decide whether or not to publish sensitive information. In some cases, they have voluntarily waited before publishing information about the military. Allied generals briefed reporters on the time and location of the D-Day invasion, but, on their honor, the editors waited until after the landing to announce it. Had a paper gone for the scoop, lives would have been lost and the paper would have lost the respect of the public and the government.

Ultimately, the ethical questions boil down to you and the reader. Would you rather write a front-page story or retain the reader’s respect? And would you feel comfortable were children to read your story at the breakfast table? Newspapers may be more widely read if they include illicit facts or sensation, but lives may be jeopardized by this information. Consider these dilemmas before the conference. We hope you will dig up some controversies that will force us to ask these ethical questions during HMCE.

### *In Committee Sessions*

When you first arrive in committee, take a seat quietly and observe the debate. You should already have familiarized yourself with parliamentary procedure and your committee’s issues, so as to be able to follow your committee. Try to figure out what topic the delegates are discussing. Are they creating any documents? Try to obtain a copy. Your observations, interviews and official papers will provide the facts for stories. You will not be able to perform any library research after arriving at the conference. Prior research (start by reading topic briefings for your committee) will be helpful. Reporters are free to ask anyone and everyone for information. As a reporter you can legally use any information a source provides, though it is generally nice to explain that fact to a source who may not have dealt with the media before. If you plan an extensive interview, please review the ground rules for on- and

off-the-record information. Any information disseminated in a public setting can be published.

### *Personal Interviews*

The delegates themselves, officials, and experts are crucial sources of information. As a journalist, your job includes more than simply reporting the facts. Try to report the insight or opinions of a person directly involved in a story. Members of Congress sometimes have more information than you realize. Interviewing itself is pretty straightforward: ask questions and write down the answers. Here are some strategies that should make the process easier and improve the quality of your quotes:

1. *Know your source.* What position does he or she hold? If you are unsure of a person's name and title, ask before proceeding with the interview. Always review the subject's name, title, state or country, and party **affiliation** at the conclusion of the interview. If you forget to record this information, your editors will make you find the person and ask before publishing the article! If you forget to include information, we have to find it ourselves. Press editors are notorious for keeping late hours as they toil at computers. We assure you that we would rather be in Athens or in bed. Who likes the pressroom without all the reporters' smiling faces? So keep your sources straight!
2. *Think of questions before the interview.* Always have a list of questions on hand and be prepared to ask any of them. But also listen to your source. If he or she says something you did not anticipate, follow up on the new information. Do you need to ask him or her to clarify a statement or be more specific? If the source describes an event, make sure to ask him or her to describe it step by step. Make sure that it is a logical sequence of events and ask the source to fill in any gaps; this is especially important for reporters covering crises. A good rule of thumb: if a source refuses to answer a question, ask why.
3. *Interviewing Manners.* What is the purpose of your interview? Are you trying to expose something? Whatever you do, do not let the source know! Avoid putting your sources on the defensive. Let them ramble if you have the time —often, people will say what they think is important even if you do not ask the right question. Sometimes sources like interviewers who just let them talk and will return to you when they have a scoop. Always thank a source after the interview. Tell the source what paper you expect the article to appear in (if you plan to use his or her quotes). It is a great way to build readership. But do not promise anything! The final publication decision is up to your

**Affiliation**—the connection one has to an organization, in this case a political party..

editors.

## Writing Opinions and Editorials

While at the conference, you will have a wide variety of options for your stories. For example, you could do a profile of the schools attending the conference, potentially including an analysis of the political atmosphere in the delegates' countries. Another idea would be to develop an "HMCE After Hours" story, in which you could review restaurants and other venues that delegations visit in the evening after the conference adjourns for the day. Also, be sure to take plenty of candid photographs during the conference, as these are a great way to make the newspaper even more exciting.

### *The Op-Ed Page*

Reporters must strive to be as **objective** as possible when writing news stories. This can be frustrating. We expect that after watching just one day of debate you will be itching to stand up and make a speech telling the delegates what they are doing is wrong! As a reporter, you cannot do that. But you can come to Press Corps editorial meetings to air your frustrations. We will hold an editorial meeting each day. They will be about half an hour long. For the first fifteen minutes, we will discuss each committee's debates and what we think about them. Then there will be a more structured debate for the last fifteen minutes to decide on a staff editorial. These will express the opinion of the paper (they run without a **byline**) on conference issues and events. We hope to point out errors of logic or overlooked facts in committee debate. If there is doomed legislation we can throw our muscle behind, we will. If a delegate or committee chair is out of line, we will censor him or her.

The staff editorials will let your voice be heard, without alienating your sources or committee. As editorial writers, you will also write signed opinion articles. Editorial writers are given free reign in topic, form and style, but must interview and verify facts just like reporters. Please indicate on the beat sheet if you are interested in the editorial beat. Although editorials are based on opinion, they should contain facts and anecdotes. Mere opinion will not persuade a delegate to listen to us. Editorials should be instructive. People want to know why they should take a particular stance. Reporters, in the guise of an editorial, can tell them why.

**Objective**—*free from bias or judgment; reporting fact without including one's opinion.*

**Byline**—*a line attributing an article to its author either at the beginning or at the end of the article.*

## Writing the Story

Once you have observed debate, gathered facts and conducted interviews, it is time to write your story. Although the content of your

article is the most important part, it is the writing that will make readers decide whether to read it. Knowing a few basics about news writing will help you in the moments before the deadline when you pound the keyboard trying to translate your notes into an article.

### *Five Tips for HMCE News Writing*

1. *Avoid Flowery Language.* The best newspaper writing is **concise**. Newspapers have space considerations, but also must consider their readership, who would rather find the facts quickly than be bogged down by prose.
2. *Attribute Facts.* Do not merely make a statement and try to pass it off as fact. You will need to give the source of your information if you want to maintain credibility. Make sure to cite sources for all information that is not self-evident. For example, rather than saying “Democrats will not support the bill,” say, “According to Senate Majority Leader, Harry Reid (D-NV), the Democrats will not support the bill.”
3. *Quotes.* One good way to back up your facts is through quotes. Predictions or comments by political analysts, politicians, lobbyists, and other experts will make your article stronger and more readable. Make sure you attribute each quote.
4. *Short Paragraphs.* Articles written for a newspaper generally have very short paragraphs, two or three sentences on average. This makes the article easier to read. Each quote should start a new paragraph.
5. *Punch the Lede.* The best way to catch the reader’s attention is with an informative and interesting opening or “lede.” (The word derives from “lead,” but underwent a spelling change, presumably to avoid being mistaken for the word for a metallic element.) The lede should be at most one or two sentences and should state the facts simply: who, what, when, where, why and how. Your aim is to give the reader enough information to convey what the story is about, and at the same time, convince him or her to keep reading. The lede should convey action; it should tell the reader why the story is important. So if a bill is passed, say so in the lede.

**Concise**—*brief; to the point.*

### *The Body of the Story*

A good strategy for composing articles is to think how you would see them if you were reading a newspaper. Most people will read the first two or three paragraphs of articles, and then move on. Sometimes, however, they will read the whole thing, especially if it pertains to them or their activities. The thing to do is to show what is important

about the article right away. The standard newspaper article is written in what is known as the “inverted pyramid,” with the essential facts at the top and decreasingly important “filler” paragraphs at the bottom. The reason for this is that it enables the editor to cut the final paragraphs, if need be, to fit the story in a specific space without losing important material. You should highlight two things in your article – the point and the draw. The point is why you wrote the article in the first place. For example, the passage of major legislation, an important debate, a Supreme Court decision, an international crisis or a scandal could be the cause for an article. The draw could possibly be the same as the point. It draws the reader’s attention to your article and the point you are trying to make. For example, when a bill is the point, the draw might be the effect of that bill. The draw to a particular debate could be a major point of compromise or controversy that arose from it. The point and draw should be in your first paragraph.

By the second paragraph, the reader should know the facts of your story. This is essential information, such as the different sides of an issue, its supporters and detractors and its effects. Each of these should be briefly stated for the benefit of a reader who is skimming the paper.

The rest of your article can delve into the history and significance of your point. Try to explain how the point arose, who brought it to the forefront of a committee and why. If your draw makes a natural question (for example, what will be the effect of a new bill on domestic abuse?) you should answer this question by the end of the article. In general, the more quotes and names you put in an article, the better. However, make sure you keep your facts straight. If you misquote someone, they may refuse to give another interview.

### *Style*

Included in your conference update will be a guide to HMCE newspaper style. In the interest of clarity and professionalism, we will use these rules as a guide for our writing. The guide will clear up such issues as how to refer to senators and representatives, whether or not languages and political parties should be capitalized, and rules for abbreviation.

## **The Press in the Real World**

The history of modern political journalism is that of what Zechariah Chafee, Jr. once called “a wild animal in our midst – restless, gigantic, always seeking new ways to use its strength.” Before the Second World War, newspapers served the two distinct roles of reporting facts unattainable by other means and expressing an opinion. Many papers were published with the stated mission to promote one cause or ideal-

ogy, and catered only to like-minded thinkers. Given their openly biased viewpoints, it is not surprising that their reporting was as much an exercise in using facts to paint a particular picture of events as it was a vehicle for informing the public.

Thanks to pioneering work by reporters such as **Edward R. Murrow**, however, newspapers began to move away from this self-serving writing style to one that proposed simply to act as a vehicle for informing the public about the political events of the day. In these early days of modern political reporting, much of the focus of papers became simply relaying the news, not creating it. This philosophy, however, limited how deeply reporters could probe into the underbelly of politics, and report on the private lives and actions of politicians that often had as much of an impact on the form of legislation as any debated on the Senate floor.

It would not be until reporter Bob Woodward actively uncovered the scandal behind Watergate, the scandal that led to President Nixon's resignation, which the modern political press would become the relentless investigative reporting machine we know today. A stark contrast can be seen between the pre-Nixon era, in which the private lives, political dealings, and economic entanglements of men like President Kennedy and President Johnson were considered inappropriate subjects on which to report, and the current era of scandal-happy reporting in which reporters delve into the personal and financial lives of politicians.

One needs to look no further than the Monica Lewinsky scandal and the Whitewater investigation to see the direction of modern journalism: what was previously un-publishable has now become front page news. The Whitewater and Lewinsky scandals dramatically influenced Bill Clinton's presidency, yet only 50 years ago, no reporter would have probed deeply enough to uncover them. In this sense, the media has taken a much more active role in determining the direction of politics, increasing its power and influence over the country.

But, you must make sure that your information is accurate. With every Whitewater story that breaks is a Jason Blair – a former *New York Times* reporter who was asked to resign from the newspaper in 2003 after editors discovered that he had **plagiarized** and fabricated many of his articles – scandal that gets the press in trouble. Instead of reporting on the political movement of the day, some critics of the media accuse newspapers of creating the news they report on, while others charge they do not go deep enough and leave uncovered stories that do not suit their agendas. It will be the job of the HMCE Press Corps to help the *HMCE Times* avoid both of these pitfalls.

**Edward R. Murrow**—*an American broadcast journalist whose reports helped lead to the censure of Senator Joseph McCarthy.*

**Plagiarized**—*Copied or imitated from another person's work and misrepresented as one's own.*

## **Conclusion**

You now have the basic outline of the most essential tools available to newspaper reporters and the basic techniques reporters use to craft an article. However, one important fact is missing: have fun! For now, keep abreast of with current events, read the newspaper daily to get a feel for how a story is written, and think of story ideas based on what interests you. We look forward to seeing you and working with you at the conference. In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or concerns!