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## The History and Continuing Impacts of Press Staff and Media Relations in Congress

Madelyn Cutrone

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**The History and Continuing Impacts of Press Staff and Media Relations  
in Congress**

by

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Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

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Submitted to the LSU Roger Hadfield Ogden Honors College in partial fulfillment of  
College Honors.

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Positionality Statement**

This project was inspired by my press fellowship in Congressman Garret Graves' office during the summer of 2022, where I interacted with congressional staffers and journalists on a daily basis. I quickly learned that the complexities of staffer-reporter relationships are often misconstrued in the public's eye, undermining the positions in both their difficulty as well as their immense contributions to society. This paper attempts to outline the everyday workflow of communications directors and congressional correspondents in Washington D.C. who spend their lives behind the scenes but keep the wheels of Washington turning.

### **1.2 Governing Question**

The governing question I set out to resolve in my research is, foundationally, what is the relationship between congressional staffers and the media. Stemming from this was my curiosity surrounding how the role of congressional staffers, specifically communications directors, influences the process and end result of a reporter's story, and what would happen without their involvement. As my research developed, it became clear that there is no one-size-fits-all approach regarding congressional office structure, communication strategies, and the journalistic process. Each office, each journalist has their own methodology for interacting with their counterparts in politics or in the media. However, a few overarching themes remained true throughout the interviews I conducted with various D.C. reporters and communications staffers. Those will be discussed at length after establishing groundwork for the historical relationship between Congress and the press.

## **2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

“The historical relationship between press and politicians in Washington has been far more intimate than adversarial,” Donald Ritchie writes in his 1991 book *Press Gallery* (Ritchie, 2005). The interactions between Congress and the media have ebbed and flowed over the past 200 years, with times of great contention and times of great cooperation. The foundation of the relationship between congressional staffers and the media was laid in the early 1900s through the professionalization of Congress, and the strong basis of cooperation that was built during that period has endured the test of time. In the 21st century, despite the outward facing persona of their relationship, whatever hostility appears on TV and social media rarely carries over into the personal and professional interactions between congressional staffers and journalists.

### **2.1 Background on Press**

Understanding that the news media as an established political and social institution is essential to appreciating the relationship between reporters and congressional staffers. Their role in national politics is not auxiliary, it is deeply intertwined in the fabric of the political machine and it is essential to the proper functioning of government.

Douglass Carter theorized in his 1959 book that the media is not only a political institution, but it is the fourth branch of government in the United States and acts in conjunction with the legislative, executive and judicial branches. In “Governing With the News,” Timothy Cook examines this concept and somewhat rejects the extremes of the fourth branch ideology while presenting his own notions of the media’s place in government. Rather than assuming a position at the right hand of the nation’s three branches, Cook hypothesizes that the media rather serves as a political and social institution. Britannica defines an institution in political science as

“a set of formal rules, informal norms, or shared understandings that constrain and prescribe political actors’ interactions with one another.” Cook developed his idea of the media as a political institution based on their “ shared processes and predictable products [...] and because of the way in which the work of newsmen is so intertwined with the work of official Washington that the news itself performs governmental tasks” (Cook, 1998).

The media is a tangible force in Washington politics and serves not only to inform the decisions of lawmakers, but shapes the minds of their constituents, influencing their voting patterns and thus contributing to the selection of the next generation of politicians to represent them. The work of journalists is a powerful political tool that cannot be underemphasized in congressional offices and among the political elite.

## **2.2 Background on Congressional Press Offices**

Communications officers were instated in government offices and agencies as the media became more professionalized and demanded increasingly nuanced attention which non-specialized staffers were unable to accommodate.

“The press corps grew because government grew. Government press operations grew because the press corps grew. Both grew because of increased complexities,” Stephen Hess explains in his book *The Government/Press Connection*. Hess continues that during the 1930s as staffers became more specialized and technical, focusing heavily on complex policy issues, they needed a middle-man to translate that work to journalists, so that journalists could translate that work to the public. At the same time, the news media was making rapid technological advancements and the government needed staffers who could handle their increasing demands. “Thus, specialized government press officers were added both to service the media and to

explain them to other government workers,” Hess concluded (Hess, 1984). Another factor that led to the increased use of press staff can be attributed to lawmakers’ interest in connecting with their districts. “communications staff and press secretaries became a larger share of member offices as senators became more engaged with the media and in communicating their work to constituents back home,” the U.S. Senate’s database shows (U.S. Senate, 2022).

This timeline coincides with the first rumored White House Press Secretary, former journalist Ray Stannard Baker who Woodrow Wilson instated as his chief spokesperson in the late 1910s. George Akerson is often recognized as the first official White House Press Secretary, appointed by President Herbert Hoover in 1929, but Meghan Menard McCune argues that “Baker deserves this title because he was the first full-time presidential press secretary,” in her Journalism History podcast (McCune, 2022). McCune also notes that Baker’s “efforts to build a rapport with journalists epitomize the role of a press secretary in a democracy.” It is possible that just as press roles in the White House informally existed before they acquired formal titles, staffers in congressional offices acted as press agents for the lawmakers before the 1930s when official press staffers were recognized.

Before communications directors became common practice in congressional offices, reporters were often in direct contact with congressmen, as Leo Rosten explains in his 1930s book titled *The Washington Correspondents*. He found it was common for reporters to maintain contact with from five to 15 lawmakers and often engaged with them socially as well as professionally. “Many congressmen are friendly with certain newspapermen, play poker with them, meet them socially and do not hesitate to offer them friendly tips,” Rosten writes (Rosten, 1974). This practice evolved as congressional offices became professionalized and reporters having personal relationships with congressmen eventually became obsolete. “There is general

agreement that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the House of Representatives was transformed from a debating arena to an ongoing, professionalized work organization,” Samuel Kernell writes in his 1977 book *Toward Understanding 19th Century Congressional Careers* (Kernell, 1977). As the positions within Congress stabilized, lawmakers began building organized staffs with specific obligations and duties. In some sense, Congress became institutionalized at that point and formal rules and norms began to take shape. This led to more organized interactions between congressmen and the media, facilitated by their press team. As Hess explains, “The position of press secretary exists largely because reporters cannot speak to policymakers whenever they feel the need” (Hess, 1984). As the demands of Congress rapidly increased, Congressmen had to be more selective with their time, and that included limiting their interactions with the media.

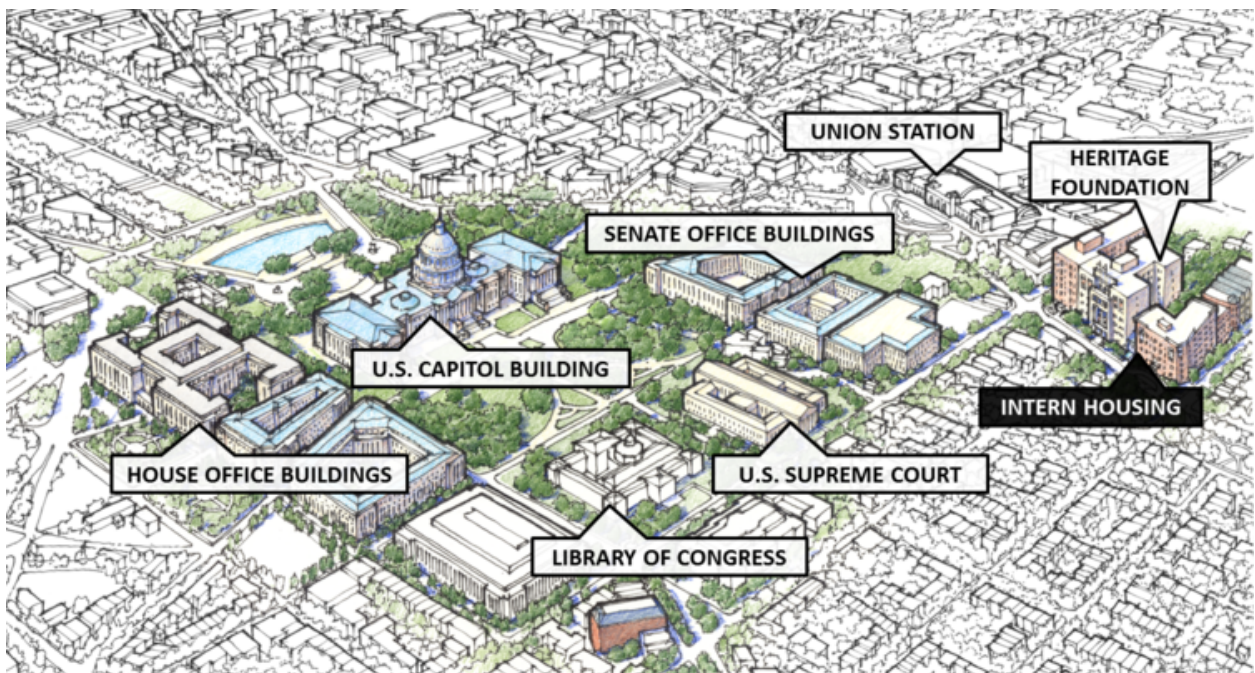
### **2.3 Organization of Congressional Press Offices**

Press teams in the House of Representatives typically consist of a singular staffer known as the Communications Director, who manages every duty that relates to the news media and representation of their congressman. This entails formulating a communication strategy and implementing it, managing all of the congressmen’s official social media platforms, setting up print, radio, and TV interviews, maintaining relationships with journalists and seeking out media mentions, writing press releases, newsletters, and speeches, managing the website and other digital platforms for the office, providing a constant stream of relevant news to the congressman and preparing them for interviews and interactions with the media. As Mitch Rabalais, communications director for Representative Julia Letlow (R-LA) put it, he is the “speech writer, social media manager, press secretary, photographer, videographer, video editor, political atlas,



[and] historical encyclopedia,” for Congresswoman Letlow. Communications directors act as middle-men for their members of Congress, a barrier between the lawmaker and the press.

On the Senate side, communications teams are significantly larger than in the House, usually consisting of 3-6 staffers. The typical responsibilities that fall within the purview of communications are allotted out to members of the press team, which typically includes a combination of a press secretary, deputy press secretary, press assistant, digital director, speech writer, and press fellow or intern, all managed by the communications director (CRS, 2021). Leadership offices, such as the Speaker of the House and Majority/Minority Whips, typically have larger communications teams due to the nature of their positions and the media attention they receive. Their press staff is usually divided among their personal office in the congressional office buildings surrounding the Capitol, their leadership office which is located inside the Capitol building, and their district offices which are in their home state.



(E.W. Richardson, 2022)

### **3. KEY FINDINGS**

Across numerous interviews with both communications directors and congressional reporters, it became clear that the most essential factor to both parties fulfilling their job expectations effectively was bridging the gap between their professions and building working relationships. Communications staffers and journalists serve two different masters, but their end goal is not entirely dissimilar. Staffers work to inform the public about the merits of their lawmaker's actions in office, while journalists work to inform the public about both the merit-filled and merit-less actions of politicians in office. Although contention can arise due to this discrepancy, under most circumstances it is in the journalist and staffers best interest to work together. The staffer can provide valuable insight and expertise on the interworkings of Congress and the minutiae of bills and amendments, without which it could take the journalist hours of research to untangle, and the journalist can then accurately disperse that knowledge to their audience. This process is beneficial for both the communications director and the reporter. Thus, the relationship between staffers and reporters is symbiotic, necessary to the proper functioning of both professions, and invaluable to those who can instill trust and longevity in their interactions with their counterparts in the media or Congress.

#### **3.1 Interviewees**

Zach Barnett – Rep. Garret Graves (R-LA)

Mitch Rabalais – Rep. Julia Letlow (R-LA)

Callie Strock – Rep. Kim Young (R-CA)

Lauren Fine – Rep. Steve Scalise (R-LA)

Ty Bofferding – Sen. Bill Cassidy (R-LA)

Jacques Petit –Rep. Ruben Gallego (D-AZ)

Nadgey Louis-Charles – House Judiciary Committee

Quint Forgey – POLITICO

Matthew Choi – POLITICO

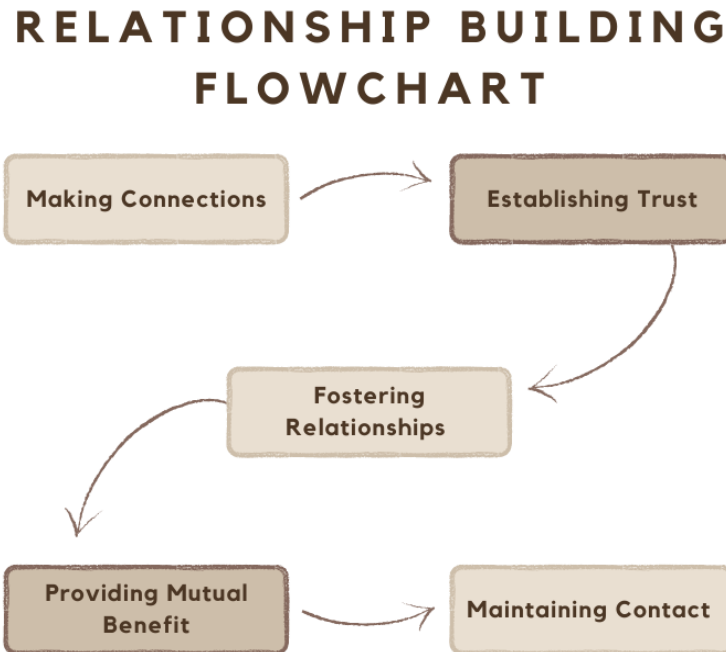
Rebecca Morin – USA Today

Evan Semones – CNN

Maev Sheehy – Bloomberg Government

### 3.2 Relationship Building

It is indisputable that knowing the right people and building the right relationships is key to success in Washington. Networking is a way of life to those on the Hill and in surrounding industries. Although some relationships happen more organically, the general networking flow appears to be as follows:



Zach Barnett, communications director for Representative Garret Graves (R-LA), has the same overarching goal as every reputable press staffer – advantageously representing the congressman in all media interactions and promoting their ideas accurately, effectively, and broadly. Barnett’s means of achieving this goal is fostering strong relationships with pertinent media contacts.

Barnett employs an array of methods to this end, most of which are common in D.C. circles, such as grabbing coffee with a reporter, meeting up for drinks after work, socializing at events, and swapping contact information. That achieves the first level of building relationships – making contacts. Next, Barnett focuses on establishing trust and creating a mutually beneficial relationship through off-the-record meetings, providing background information, connecting the reporter with other contacts, and eventually setting up on-the-record interviews with the congressman.

Ty Bofferding, communications director for Senator Bill Cassidy (R-LA), takes a similar approach to building relationships with reporters but prioritizes quality over quantity in networking situations, explaining that it’s not always about who you know, it’s about how well you know the right people. “Sure, you could have the phone number of every single news director in the state. But if you call them and they haven’t talked to you once in the last three years, you don’t actually know that person,” Bofferding asserted. He emphasizes fostering meaningful and genuine relationships with reporters and other staffers rather than “glad-handing” at events and developing superficial connections. “It’s not about building a genuine relationship. It’s about seeking a relationship genuinely,” Bofferding stressed, noting that some staffers and reporters are over-eager in making connections, which is often interpreted as insincerity. At the same time, Bofferding added that he typically keeps conversations work-related unless personal

information comes up naturally in a conversation, clarifying that you don't have to be close friends or share personal details in order to have a professional work relationship. "You don't need to be really close friends with reporters to have a positive working relationship where you both respect each other and do a good job," Bofferding concluded.

Matthew Choi, a Washington correspondent for the Texas Tribune and formerly a POLITICO reporter, shared Bofferding's sentiment. "The principle of building relationships is not to make friends, it's to establish that you're a fair person who can do a job well [and] that they can trust you to do your job well. There are a lot of bad faith actors out there, so you want to establish that you're [not one of them]," Choi commented. When he first started on the Hill, he prioritized "eye to eye, hand to hand" contact with congressional staffers so he could make memorable connections, assess their workflow and familiarize himself with their office structure so he could determine how to best move forward with their relationship. While Bofferding was not opposed to forming personal friendships with colleagues as long as the two could remain professional in work environments and separate their friendship from their work relationship, Choi disagreed. "We can be friendly, but we're never friends," Choi said, describing his relationships with congressional staffers as "professional," and nothing more.

### **3.3 Functioning of Relationship**

Communications Director Lauren Fine leads a team of five press staffers for House Majority Leader Steve Scalise (R-LA). In her role, Fine oversees the deputy communications director, the writer, press assistant, and a press secretary located in Scalise's Louisiana district.

Scalise's position in the House grants him an immense amount of national attention, which Fine maneuvers daily – from scheduling print, radio, and TV spots to interacting with

reporters in the halls of the Capitol buildings. Fine said her role in a reporter's story varies, depending on which category the article falls into:

- **Offense:** If Scalise's office is interested in promoting certain messages or topics, the communications team will reach out to reporters who might be interested in pursuing that story, or respond to requests they've received. Following this, staffers can assist the reporter with their story by providing relevant information, either on or off the record, access to Scalise, connections to other members of Congress and their staff, etc.
- **Defense:** If the messaging in a story is negative toward Scalise, the Republican Party, or issues relevant to Scalise's platform, the communications team will reach out or respond to the reporter to either correct the record or offer a balancing opinion to the piece.
- **Non-Involvement:** If the communications team doesn't see value in the reporter's story, they will not engage.

Fine's interactions with reporters is also determined by their reputation on Capitol Hill, her personal relationship with them, their audience and if their outlet is generally fair to Scalise, among other factors. Fine's philosophy on media interaction epitomizes the perfect balance of caution and trust that Bofferding noted is crucial to maintaining healthy relationships with the media.

Over his six years of working in congressional press offices, Bofferding has witnessed many types of communications staffers and their various approaches to interacting with the media. He says some are gatekeepers who closely guard their congressman, always suspicious of the media and their motives, and take a defensive approach with reporters. There's others who are more proactive – constantly reaching out to the media and pitching stories, making sure their

boss is current and in the spotlight. Then there's press staffers who like to focus on background interviews, off the record meetings with journalists and helping develop stories. They thrive on building solid, long-lasting relationships with the press and assisting in the behind-the-scenes journalism process. Bofferding concluded that the most effective communications directors are a mix of the three camps: proactive on some issues, wary about others, and help journalists on background to build relationships whenever possible.

Agriculture Reporter for Bloomberg Government Maeve Sheehy said congressional staffers are essential to her reporting process because of the insight and background they can provide for nuanced bills, amendments, and resolutions. "Congressional staff is great, because they're the ones who are doing the heavy lifting with legislation and getting things done," Sheehy shared. "The staff has a big role to play in terms of background; explaining how they wrote a piece of legislation and what really matters to their office, which doesn't sound super complicated, but if you have a 50-page piece of legislation, then it's really helpful to talk to the person who helped write it about what provisions are important." Rosten described off the record and background interviews as providing "Information intended to enlighten the correspondents and provide them with a richer background for the interpretation of events." Rosten continued to detail under what circumstances background information might be provided and how it could be beneficial to reporters: "'Off the record' information may involve an explanation of why an executive cannot discuss something for publication, why he will not make a particular announcement, or why he intends to adopt a certain policy. It may contain information which is tentative; it may deal with matters still in a state of flux; it may entail facts which it would be premature or indiscreet to reveal at the moment; it may embody a point of view to which the informant does not wish to commit himself at the moment" (Rosten, 1974).

The functioning of journalism and the use of background information have stood the test of time, as the description Rosten provided is remarkably similar, if not exact, to what both reporters and communications directors described in their interviews on the matter.

Choi added that “staffers are essential for understanding the nitty gritty” of policies and bills. The usefulness of congressional staffers in detangling the details of Congress went undisputed among the interviewed journalists. POLITICO reporter Quint Forgey specified that the role of congressional staffers in his reporting process is defined by their ability to give him “an official expression of the politician [...] in a prompt and timely and digestible manner,” which allows him to add the congressman’s voice in his story

However, congressional staffers have the ability to provide far more than background information. They are the route through which journalists can secure meetings and interviews with the congressmen. It is typically seen as a faux pas for reporters to contact a member directly to ask for statements or set up interviews without vetting it through the communications director. However, reporters have free rein of all capital buildings with press credentials, excluding member-only areas such as inside the House and Senate chambers. Members are often approached by reporters outside the chambers, near their offices, or in the Senate subways. When possible, communications directors stand by to monitor those conversations and interfere if necessary.

Forgey recognized that stopping a member in the hallway for an impromptu interview “often leads to a more blunt, honest interview, a more casual conversation,” and for that reason it can be preferable to setting up a formal interview through the press team. Forgey said that outside of those circumstances, he avoids contacting congressmen directly because he “knows it



irritates the people that work for them.” Choi said it comes down to understanding the functioning of each office – some communications teams have the expectation that the congressman will hand out their personal information so reporters can contact them at will, other lawmakers understand the role of the communications team is to vet the reporters they speak to and are tight-lipped when speaking to reporters outside of those circumstances. USA Today reporter Rebecca Morin said although she has access to several congressmen’s personal phone numbers, she still prefers to set up interviews through their press teams as a level of respect to them, ensuring they aren’t blindsided by any interactions she may have with the congressmen. She noted that part of building a reliable work relationship with press teams is making sure everyone is on the same page and remaining cognisant of the motives and goals of each party. Sheehy broke down the process further, explaining that her approach changes depending on what type of comment she needs from the lawmaker. “I’ll go through comms directors a lot,” Sheehy began. “If there’s a question about a vote time, or if I need to find out more background on a bill, I’ll go through a policy director usually and [ask if] there’s anybody in your office who can walk me through this issue, and what you’re working on, and usually they’re pretty responsive. But if there’s a quick question, like I was working on a story about the baby formula vote this week, so I was going up to a lot of lawmakers and just basically asking if they were working on it, or if they’re planning on voting for it. So if it’s a simple question, usually going straight to the lawmakers is easiest if you can find them.” When she first started on the Hill, Sheehy recalled that it was nerve-racking to approach congressmen and question them, but as time went on it became part of her daily life in the Capitol. “I spend a lot of time in the Senate subway asking questions. I think what makes it easier is that there’s so many people around you doing the exact same thing. If you just go up to [congressmen], and say your name and your outlet, most

lawmakers, especially if they've been in Congress for a while, are very willing to talk to you. And usually, it'll be that they have an aide next to them as well.”

In essence, there are three types of requests for comments that reporters can approach Congressmen with: quick questions, longer form interview-style questions, and controversial or delicate topics. There are also three categories of congressmen: those who will respond to all requests for comments with complete disregard of their communications team, those who are cognizant of the role of their press team and will only answer quick questions but not long-form or controversial questions, and those who are closed off to all media interactions except those that are facilitated by their press team. Reporters typically make their decisions about approaching congressmen based on all of these factors, including the expectations of the communications director. Ideally, this interaction is a two-way street: a communications team should try to give a reporter access to the congressmen if they have a legitimate request, and a reporter should respect the communications team enough to not approach a member with the latter two requests without approval. If both of these factors are at play and are evident to the other party, it will foster mutual trust, respect, and efficiency, leading to a reliable work relationship.

### **3.4 Priorities of Communication Directors**

The priorities of every communications team are defined by the goals of the congressman and his political motivations. Some lawmakers are hyperfocused on issues directly relating to their constituents – broadband access in rural areas, FEMA, water quality, crime, etc. Other politicians are focused on broader, national issues such as gun control, abortion rights, LGBTQ rights, the economy, etc. Typically, members of the House are more constituent focused, while

Senators tackle national issues, although this is not a blanket rule. The priorities of every congressional office are vastly different and their media strategies are directly related to their legislative goals. Due to that, some lawmakers prefer their press outreach to focus on local news stations and newspapers, so their constituents and voter base stay informed of their efforts in Congress. Other lawmakers keep national news front and center, and their communications directors are tasked with keeping their name relevant in mainstream news. Here's a brief look at how that difference plays out in congressional offices across the country, and across parties:

Communications Director Callie Strock works for Representative Kim Young, a South Korean-born American representing California's 39th congressional district, which includes Los Angeles, Orange County, San Bernardino, Rowland Heights, and portions of several other cities. Hers is one of the few districts that voted for President Joe Biden while having Republicans elected to their congressional districts.

Because Young's district falls within the LA media market, Strock said it can be difficult to amplify her boss's voice amid media that is saturated by celebrities, Hollywood, and pop culture – outlets rarely prioritize political content. Additionally, Strock said around 36 other members of Congress share that market and are fighting for attention in it, so what little air time is allotted to national politics is difficult to grab – in fact, she compared Young appearing on a local outlet to other congressmen booking a spot on CNN or other mainstream news stations. She even noted that it is typically easier for her to book Young on Fox Business than most of their local outlets. Los Angeles is also one of the most expensive media markets in the country, which compounds these problems during campaign season.

Rather than relying on local outlets to reach constituents, Strock said their office has had to utilize other methods of engagement, such as targeted mail outreach programs, social media, newsletters, press releases, and more. Strock said that if necessary, Young's office could operate independent of traditional media because they have been forced to not depend on it. "We can't rely on that," Strock said. "It's too tough of a market."

Communications Director Mitch Rabalais has worked for Representative Julia Letlow since she took office in June 2021, when she became the first Republican woman from Louisiana elected to Congress. Letlow represents Louisiana's 5th congressional district which encompasses much of the rural northeastern portion of the state, including Monroe, Alexandria, Opelousas and Amite.

Because of the demographics of their district, Letlow's office focuses primarily on local news rather than catering to a national audience. "Our philosophy is we don't always seek out national press but we find opportunities around our issues and if we can speak to the national press, we do," Rabalais said.

On one occasion, Letlow had a seven-minute feature on CBS This Morning with David Begnaud to discuss the death of her husband, Luke Letlow, who died of COVID-19 just weeks after being elected for the position that Julia Letlow now holds (CBS News, 2021). She also published an [op-ed in the Wall Street Journal](#), where she used her platform to encourage vaccination against COVID-19 (Letlow, 2021). These opportunities represent Letlow's philosophy on national news – if her platform can spread awareness and make a positive impact nationally, but especially in her district, she will accept those opportunities. Otherwise, she focuses on media opportunities that will reach her local audience.

Rabalais' contact with reporters is less frequent than other offices because their district is host to far fewer media outlets than other urban cities like Baton Rouge or New Orleans – only two TV stations and one newspaper. “I’ll go whole days without talking to reporters,” Rabalais noted. “That’s the nature of our district. KNOE can’t run a Julia Letlow story every night.”

Communications Director Jacques Petit works for the admittedly outspoken and often controversial Representative Ruben Gallego (D-AZ). Petit says the priority in his office is to keep Gallego on the news and in people’s minds. “I’m of the opinion that you need to do every single media opportunity that you can, unless it's going to ruin you,” Petit said, which includes both local and national mentions. Petit added that whether they focus on local or national news depends on what issues are at play in a given week.

A lawmaker’s priorities in this regard determines which reporters their press team reaches out to and when. The relationship between staffers and reporters is often a volley of pitches based on current events in Congress. Nearly all of the communications directors interviewed noted that at some points, they send out more pitches than they receive – based on what issues their boss is exploring and what bills they want to bring attention to in the media. But most of the time, at least for high-profile offices, they receive more requests than they send out. Oftentimes staffers cannot accommodate every request to speak to the congressmen that’s received, so it comes down to who’s asking, what outlet they work for, what their motive is, and how it will benefit the congressman to speak to them.

When it comes to motive, Bofferding emphasized the importance of giving reporters the benefit of the doubt. “It's easy to tell yourself a story [about] why this person is trying to write the story, or you're trying to prescribe intentions to this reporter. A lot of people do that. You

always tell yourself the worst possible story about why somebody is doing something.” Rather than viewing those situations pessimistically, Bofferding prefers to ask himself “What is the best possible reason that this person could be coming to me with this issue [or] with this question?” He’s found that giving reporters the benefit of the doubt is pivotal to having productive conversations when disagreements about a story arise. If a reporter inaccurately describes a bill or slants a story against his boss, Bofferding likes to have an open discussion with the reporter and explain his perspective before jumping to conclusions about why the reporter wrote the story the way they did. Bofferding has found that it often stems from misunderstandings about the bill itself rather than malicious attempts to undermine a congressman they disagree with. At the end of the day, Bofferding noted, “reporters are reporters, they’re not policy experts.” It’s the job of congressional staffers, who are the policy experts, to inform the journalists and work with them on background to educate them about a bill their boss is working on. Reporters are overworked, often underpaid, and typically just trying to understand the basics of a bill to report on it. “The nervous strain on them is great; the routine is tiring; the tension of covering an incessant flow of news is acute,” Rosten writes of reporters in the 1930s – and how much more so are reporters in the 21st century subjected to the constant stream of breaking news that they must stay apprised of at all times (Rosten, 1947). “I don’t see the press as the enemy. I think they provide a very important service. And at the end of the day, they’re doing their job,” Bofferding concluded.

Reporters doubtlessly have their own personal motives in writing a particular story, likely stemming from the motives of their employers. More often than not, those motives are journalistically pure – simply seeking the truth and reporting it. However, every story has an angle, and Petit internally questions how to handle their framing before entertaining an interview possibility. “When a reporter comes to me, they’re coming to me with a certain frame they’re

trying to work with so at that point, I'm at a crossroads. Do I buy into their framing? Or do I try to persuade them to look at it from a different angle?" These issues all weave their way back to relationships – the better a communications director knows a reporter, the more frank they can be about their side of the story and what they're looking to see in an article about their member of Congress. Similarly, the better a communications director knows a reporter, the more sure they can be that the reporter will portrait their congressman accurately in a story, making them feel more at ease providing access to the lawmaker for interviews and questioning.

Fine said that although she has found most reporters to be fair and legitimate in dealing with her office, she simultaneously believes many mainstream outlets have a negative bias against Republicans, which can sometimes make interactions with the media more adversarial, whereas working with conservative outlets is typically more "collegial." She noted, however, that relationships with congressional reporters, even those who align with the opposing party, is likely less contentious than it would be in the White House or other areas of Washington politics.

Coming from the journalist angle, Forgey has found that although public discourse may show that relationships between journalists and politicians have become worse, private dealings have remained peaceful. "As the public animosity has ratcheted up, the private communications has stayed mostly professional," Forgey finds, explaining that staffers and reporters have a baseline understanding that everyone is simply doing their jobs, and although their loyalties may differ, they can remain collegial and helpful to meet their own end goals. "I've usually found that no matter how conservative or liberal they perceive you to be, they're still just as eager to pitch to you, they're still just as eager to get you the statement, and it's a very professional back-and-forth," Forgey said.

Choi explained that tensions usually arise when perceptions of reality differ between the journalist and staffer. “Communications directors want to portray their members in a specific way which may or may not be the most holistic, accurate way of portraying them,” Choi gathered. “We know that, they know we know that. But they understand what my job is. They’re just trying to do damage control. The only time that there’s a real issue is if I do something they perceive as unfair, for example, if I publish an attack on them, and I never give them a chance to respond, which I try to never do.” Situations do arise where journalists who have professional relationships with a communications director publish stories that their press staff disagrees with or dislikes, but the most crucial factor in maintaining their relationship is having honest conversations about why the story will be framed a certain way, and giving the press staff ample time to respond to any allegations. Although it can be unpleasant, it is not always hostile or aggressive and it can easily remain professional if a solid work relationship is present. In those situations, Morin explained “It will be a little tense, but it’s pretty amicable. I’ve never had someone treat me badly for a story that they didn’t like. Sometimes it can get a little tense. But luckily, for me personally, I’ve not had bridges burned over stories. And so it’s pretty amicable on my end. Not everyone’s going to like everything you write or have the same opinion. But for the most part, I’ve always had a pretty amicable relationship with the communications directors that I work with.”

On the other hand, Evan Semones, writer and producer at CNN and former POLITICO reporter, has experienced some contention when working with congressional staffers. In some cases, communications directors would provide comments on controversial issues but request to remain an anonymous source, which Semones believed violated the integrity of his article. In



other instances, press staff would make admissions in private but would keep them off the record so Semones had to go to print without a comment from their office entirely.

As polarization in politics and the media has increased over the years, so has the hesitancy for sources to come forward and speak their minds – cancel culture has altered the transparency of political offices and the ability of journalists to report the truth. Although there has always been fear of retaliation for insider sources and staff members disclosing information to the public, submitting comments on run-of-the-mill office politics or legislation out of fear for social media’s reaction is a new phenomenon.

Overall, the public perception of how the media interacts with lawmakers is drastically flawed, because it is typically either one extreme or the other. Morin has found that the public tends to either believe that journalists are “too cozy” with lawmakers and thus, corrupt, or that the media is unduly hostile toward politicians and their relationship is so polarized and contentious that working relationships are unachievable. The reality, Morin explained, is somewhere in the middle of the two extremes. Although some reporters are undoubtedly contentious with lawmakers, and perhaps others are too involved with the congressmen they report on, these outliers are not characteristic of typical reporter-lawmaker interactions. The vast majority of relationships between the media and congressional staff are as described throughout this essay: professional, amiable, cordial, friendly, understanding and symbiotic.

#### **4. Reflections for the Future**

It is evident that the evolution of congressional staffers has professionalized the functioning of political offices. As Congress transitioned from a part-time job in the mid-1900s to a lifestyle of the political elite, contact with lawmakers became progressively inaccessible.

Press staff began to act not as auxiliary channels to reach the congressmen, but the *only* channel to reach the congressman, other than the fleeting moments they spent walking the halls of the Capitol buildings. In essence – a communications director has near complete control over who does and does not speak to their Congressman. After all, lawmakers themselves hire their communications team because of their trustworthiness and their ability to manage the flow of press related inquiries that flood the office. If a communications director advises their congressman to avoid contact with a journalist, they are extremely likely to comply, and thus, all contact that reporter has with the congressional office is shut down. In this way, communications directors act as the gatekeepers of congressmen – they control the flow of information into and out of their office and any hope of sustained communications a reporter has lies solely in the hands of the press staff.

Similarly, just as press staffers are gatekeepers of the congressmen, so the media are gatekeepers of political insider information that they can either share with the public, or shield the public from. This raises two questions. One – if Congress is gatekept by congressional staffers, and certain details are shared with the media, who further gatekeeps those details and deigns to share with the public what they decide profitable – how much of the reality of Washington is America actually seeing? Is the public only privy to the exact details that both congressional staff and the media find appropriate to share?

Secondly, how has the age of social media and citizen journalism altered the role of congressional staff and journalists as gatekeepers? With the prominence of leakers, hackers, and the constant stream of updates on Twitter, more information is being dispersed now than ever. Has this diminished the purpose of the media and amplified the direct voice of congressmen by providing outlets for them to speak directly to their constituents at the push of a button? In

*Making the News*, Gaye Tuchman wrote that “The news aims to tell us what we want to know, need to know, and should know” (Tuchman, 1980). The media is indisputably less vital in the 21st century as access to information has increased exponentially. Broadly speaking, mainstream news is no longer the primary source Americans use to stay informed.

In *The Washington Correspondents*, Rosten writes that “Newspaper publicity is the legislator's life-line, his most potent method of keeping ‘the folks back home’ alert to his achievements and his stature. The congressman who has aspirations for re-election cannot afford to adopt a cavalier air to the newspaperman who controls the news which his constituents read” (Rosten, 1974). In the 86 years since this statement was written, the media landscape has been permanently altered by the advent of the internet, social media, and the digital age. The relevance of the news media is debatable, but one thing is certain – it is no longer a lawmakers “life-line” or his most effective way of keeping constituents informed. The media is still a powerful force, especially in its impact on certain demographics, and can still be used to lawmakers advantage or disadvantage. “A congressman knows that papers which helped elect him can also help to defeat him,” Rosten writes – and this is perhaps one thing that has endured the test of time.

#### **4.1 The Age of Modernized Media**

The future of journalism – at least as far as Washington is concerned – is epitomized by the rise of publications such as Punchbowl News and POLITICO Playbook. These two newsletter-based subscription programs are known far and wide in D.C. political circles and reading them is essential to keep up with the goings-on of Washington. Rabalais mentioned that he heavily relies on the media to inform his work, and begins each day with at least POLITICO Playbook, Punchbowl News, POLITICO Huddle, and NRP Morning Edition. These publications

round up the requisite facts about Washington politics and keep readers apprised of even the smallest details that could quickly become primetime news in a few days time. The staff at Punchbowl News is particularly skilled at rounding up the minutia and micro-dramas within Congress. They are indisputably one of the best – if not *the* best – and most important publications for those involved in national politics to read.

Jake Sherman and Anna Palmer, both former POLITICO Playbook editors, combined their skills and formed Punchbowl News in 2021 after writing the bestseller *The Hill to Die On: The Battle for Congress and the Future of Trump's America*. Punchbowl specializes in “scooplets,” which are aptly described in a [Columbia Journalism Review feature](#) on the founders of Punchbowl:

“Friday morning last fall, in the subterranean labyrinth of the Capitol building, on either side of thick double doors: a throng of reporters and the House Democratic Caucus. No sound from the room could be heard in the hallway. Members of the press were in covid masks, camped out while Nancy Pelosi, the House Speaker, updated her colleagues on negotiations over a \$3.5 trillion budget plan. Pelosi, trying to gauge support, asked who planned to vote for a competing bipartisan infrastructure bill. Seconds later, an update appeared on everyone’s phone.

It was 10:57am. Jake Sherman tweeted: “Pelosi is now having everybody who wants to pass the BIF stand.” (The “BIF” stood for “bipartisan infrastructure.”) Milliseconds later: “Almost everyone stood up.”

Sherman was not in the room. He was out in the gaggle of reporters. But someone at the meeting had been texting him updates, which he immediately shared with his 350,000 followers—including many of his fellow journalists, who were still standing around, and House members, not all of whom were happy to see a public play-by-play of their caucus as it was happening. Jared Huffman, a congressman from California’s Marin County, took the floor and asked that whoever was leaking to Sherman please stop.

11:12am. Sherman again: “@JaredHuffman has suggested to the room that people stop leaking because the meeting is being tweeted out.”

It was a small scoop—a scooplet, as they’re known locally—with instant gratification and swift pushback. A scooplet is highly specific to occupants of the Beltway—voraciously hungry for intel and gossip, which is their currency. Few journalists are better at serving up scooplets than Sherman and his longtime writing partner Anna Palmer, who started *Punchbowl* together last year. It is a newsletter that may telegraph the particular interests, excesses, and contradictions of Washington better than any other publication. (Piore, 2022)”

Punchbowl’s sweeping success in just one year of publication is tremendously important in understanding the emerging journalism landscape that is vastly different from traditional media. A former Senate staffer turned partner at a political consulting firm Bryan DeAngeli characterized his views of media in D.C.: “I think of Playbook now as kind of covering the broad ecosystem of DC. I think of Axios as covering the intersection of business and politics and a little bit of culture. Punchbowl allows me to understand the dynamics behind what is happening on Capitol Hill. I read all three,” DeAngeli said (Piore, 2022). While legacy media is still relevant in D.C. and beyond, it is upstaged by sources like Punchbowl that deeply understand the needs of modern news-consumers, and how to provide the content relevant to their lives and interests. But how does this speak to the relationship between congressional staffers and Hill reporters?

For reporters, it means one thing – as jobs in traditional media continue to decline, there will likely be a sharp increase in demand at publications like Punchbowl News, and perhaps an even sharper demand for the creation of more newsletter subscription programs that cater to various audiences. Relationship-building and networking in D.C. circles is as relevant now as it ever was. Making connections, being privy to insider details is immensely useful and marketable.

For congressional staffers, the digital age and the slow collapse of traditional media means becoming creative and efficient in developing new methods to reach constituents. Press staff have to take matters into their own hands rather than relying on reporters to do the job of informing constituents for them. Newsletters, podcasts, social media, postcards and mail outs, mass texting programs, app development, and similar methods are key to connecting with constituents – many of whom ignore both national and local news due to disinterest or distrust.

## **5. Conclusion**

Some things change, and many things stay the same. Relationships in D.C. will always be vital. The communication between press staff and reporters is unlikely to fluctuate with the ebbs and flows of the political climate – it has stood the test of time and weathered seasons of animosity. The tradition of cooperation and collegiality has transcended the momentary polarization and hostility that regularly occurs, in varying degrees of intensity, between political parties – not just in the 2000s, but throughout the existence of both professionalized roles. This speaks to the resiliency and the lasting importance of those relationships on the social and political dynamics in America. The strength and moral stature of both journalists and communications directors in their ability to cooperate with those with whom they may disagree is admirable and indispensable. Their role in national politics is often taken for granted, but it is monumental in the functioning of government. The rise of modern journalism may change the dissemination of the news, but it will not change the relevance and fundamental importance of the enduring relationship between Communications Directors and Washington Correspondents.

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