

Exit essay: a reflection on more than 50 years of media coverage in the Illinois statehouse

Editor's Note: This is an abridged version of Simon Review Paper #61, first published by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute before former Illinois House Speaker Mike Madigan [was indicted](#) in March on federal corruption charges. Brown told GJR that "the post indictment comments by Madigan and (former lobbyist Michael) McClain speak for themselves. I find the conduct alleged in the charges totally inconsistent with what I observed from Michael Madigan over nearly 40 years of working on his senior staff and volunteering at the Democratic Party of Illinois." For more about Madigan, read GJR's [LEDE story](#) on March 31 by veteran journalist Susy Schultz about Chicago Tribune political reporter Ray Long and his recently published book on the former speaker.

How does a three-month contract become a 38-year communications project?

In May 1983, my then-boss, Chicago Mayor Jane Byrne, lost reelection. Then-Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan offered me a three-month consulting contract. I wrote some news releases, sat in on meetings, and researched some bills.



Former Illinois Senate President Mike Madigan speaks to reporters. Longtime spokesman Steve Brown (third from left) peaks around a pillar to watch. (Photo courtesy of Steve Brown)

I had done eight years at the Daily Herald in various posts including political editor and Statehouse correspondent. Then four more with the City of Chicago.

When the 1983 spring session ended, Madigan asked about additional work for Illinois House Democrats. I thought, "Why not pitch in for a few more weeks?"

Those "few more weeks" became more than 38 years of daily contact with the media on behalf of Madigan and House Democrats and as a volunteer spokesman for the Democratic Party of Illinois.

I found my interest in journalism as a process of elimination. The profession seemed like a path with payroll as opposed to poetry.

My St. Louis area high school had a newspaper, but no journalism classes. To my good fortune, Southern Illinois University professor Manion Rice led a high school journalism group. I received a scholarship from SIU, so I never looked for another college.

I have had no academic public relations education – all on-

the-job training. College was filled with journalism, history and sociology classes. I worked at SIU's award-winning *Daily Egyptian* newspaper. I started in the back shop doing paste-up and layout. I would creep into the newsroom at the end of my shift, offer to write a headline, maybe catch a ringing phone. Covering protests after student killings at Kent State University in 1970 cemented my determination to become a newspaper reporter.

Joining the staff of the Arlington Heights *Daily Herald* after graduation and six months of duty with the Illinois National Guard, I had my wish – sort of.

I covered park districts and police departments in Hoffman Estates and Schaumburg – fast-growing Chicago suburbs without much cop shop news. Black Friday shopping at the sprawling Woodfield Mall was an annual Page 1 news event.

A fondness for politics led me to trailing veteran newsman Bob Lahey to political events. I helped rewrite notes for on-deadline call-ins to the copy desk and sometimes filled in for him. I later jumped at the chance to replace him.

A move to Springfield to create the *Daily Herald's* first full-time Statehouse Bureau provided a change of pace. It seemed good to cover events in person rather than localize wire copy, and there was time for some investigative reporting.

The lure away from journalism was generally better money. It was also a relief from the repetition of gathering seemingly similar stories on the same schedule year after year.

That three-month public relations contract Madigan offered in 1983 grew into a semi-full-time job.

Setting the public policy agenda

How is the public policy agenda set? How do some legislative issues become news while others never see the light of day?

One thing to consider is what impact an issue is likely to make on day-to-day life. Another is a proposal's chance of becoming a law.

The media are usually involved in some aspects of public policy formation. Sometimes an issue races quickly to the solution stage, while others may take years or are never fully addressed. The media is often drawn to the taboo. Some important topics never get much attention. Fiscal issues almost always get shortchanged.

An issue becomes "news" when the push for action becomes loud or pops up in multiple jurisdictions. Not that many years ago, a front-page story in a major newspaper could open the spigot. Now the process is less clear.

While some issues develop a life of their own, others need skilled communications specialists to help focus the attention, craft a message in an understandable fashion, and follow up with reporters, editors and hosts.

Public attention can translate into public support. There are problems addressed and solutions applied because the trouble has gained spot news coverage.

The typical legislative session can bring about many opportunities to attract media attention. Besides the annual routine of news about the state spending plan and the governor's priorities, the general game plan is to track state and local media coverage.

As a session approaches, leadership and senior staff review the landscape and assess what might be occurring in Illinois and how legislation could help address problems. These ideas are shared with lawmakers, who are taking the pulse of their district.

Some legislators have the knack for doing this on their own. They craft legislation *and* a public communications plan. Some

lawmakers need help. Hundreds of bills get introduced each session. Many have no reason to attract media attention.

The popular lore in Illinois has been that the only things that really count are the opinion and interests of former Speaker Madigan. My experience as a close observer for almost four decades has shown me that it is more complicated. Madigan's invincibility was generally created by media outlets looking for a shortcut to define him for their audience.

Madigan tended to focus his energy on helping rank-and-file lawmakers address local issues. If he could help them address a problem, it generally eased the headaches of reelection, which led to support for Madigan's continued leadership. He was focused on basic electoral politics, which is the essence of representative democracy.

Getting a bill to the top of the legislative heap and securing votes for passage is the task at hand. The media signal interest with continued reporting, columns, editorials and op-ed pieces.

Media outreach can take several paths, which have evolved along with changes to the shape and size of the Statehouse press corps. Beyond the initial media push, subsequent efforts can include interview placements on radio or television programs. The local versions of the network Sunday shows can produce a waterfall effect when on-air discussions are picked up by other organizations. Long-form talk radio interviews permit guests to explain specific issues and actions in detail – not usually the case when reporters are collecting quotes for stories on deadline.

Next are efforts to enlist interest groups to do the shows or get in front of social service organizations to talk about a proposal – such appearances can capture more media attention.

There always needs to be follow-up with press releases and the full array of messages afforded by social media.

Another element of a press secretary's activities involves keeping track of brewing investigations and in-depth reporting projects. General practice is to cooperate with enterprising reporters' efforts, which means not sharing a reporter's questions or document requests with others.

The essentials of being an effective spokesperson are much like those of being a competent reporter. Write and speak in terms that are heard at home by everyday people. If an explanation is full of jargon and acronyms, the reader/listener will turn off.

A spokesperson should be prepared to answer questions to fill in the blanks. Proper preparation makes the process go well. Learn to write well, communicate orally, develop the ability to analyze and to think critically. Learn how to use social media with the understanding that it is impossible to have multiple identities.

The evolution of Statehouse coverage

"The more the merrier" has been a long-standing belief of mine. More robust news coverage equals a better understanding of issues. If the media is present in large numbers, reporters are more likely to look beyond the constraints of daily deadlines.

In the '70s, WGN-TV kept a crew at the Statehouse nearly every session day, as did Springfield-area TV stations. "Illinois Lawmakers" was launched by the state's public broadcasting stations in 1986, offering multiple shows each session covering big speech days and in-depth interviews with legislators.

In the era of the pre-internet Springfield press corps, radio news was the quickest method to move information. Numerous stations had robust newsrooms and updated newscasts on the 30s all day long.

In the '70s, afternoon newspapers had not completely disappeared. Early editions hit the downtown Chicago streets about 9 a.m. and depending on the size and gravity of the headline, reporters were expected to chase "react" to whatever piece blazed across Page 1.

Some of these recollections are now just dim memories of another era. The pace has been quickened with a never-ending news cycle, meaning less time to develop stories.

Over time, Chicago and Springfield TV stations came to cover the Legislature less often. The loss of reporters assigned to the state Capitol beat has been a loss of quality and quantity of coverage of state government and the Legislature. The veteran news people who covered the Capitol for many years knew how the legislative process worked and who the major players were and could capture and take back to their readers the story of what was really going on.

Diluted reporter resources mean a diminished understanding of the General Assembly's work. With that in mind, I worked with House Democratic staffers to focus media attention on specific bills. Social media also offers a chance to compensate for the smaller press corps. It is not the same.

Rich Miller's Capitol Fax blog evolved as the Statehouse press corps thinned and has become the go-to place to keep track of political and legislative doings. Video crews from Advanced Digital Media (BlueRoomStream) provide raw video of news conferences and other events. A relatively new venture by WGEM-TV, the Quincy-based NBC affiliate, has a crew in the Statehouse full time. They provide stories to other downstate stations owned by Quincy Media Inc. Web-based organizations try to offer more Statehouse news. These entities seem to come and go.

Thirty years ago, those who gathered content had the time to attend a news conference or schedule interviews, research

blank spots, track down alternative points of view, and prepare a report. It might take much of the day to prepare the reporting from a news conference.

In recent years, technology has driven the coverage. Reporters are expected to cover an event, question a subject, take photos or video, and file comments on Twitter. The process has some value in terms of the real-time disbursement of information, but there are numerous shortcomings, like the lack of time to seek balance.

What is probably the lone exception to “the more the merrier” in the press corps began around 2010 as efforts grew to place advocacy-backed reporters in the Statehouse. These developments brought deep concern from media watchdogs. Most concerning was whether these were just extensions of lobbying efforts masquerading as news.

Scott Reeder brought things to a head when he sought House floor press credentials on behalf of the Illinois Policy Institute. Personal research suggested the reporting might be a tactic in a lobbying game plan. If an organization lobbied, it seemed inappropriate to grant press credentials. Reeder’s request was denied. He brought a federal lawsuit, which was dismissed, and an appeal resulted in a ruling that essentially stated the House had the ability to make the rules governing access.

Since the court case, the same decision has been applied to requests from the Better Government Association and Capitol News Illinois.

Some have argued that each of these groups should be credentialed. The situation is filled with mixed emotions for someone who fervently believes that more reporters involved in legislative coverage means the public has a better chance to know what is being done to and for them.

Steve Brown was press secretary for former Illinois House

Speaker Michael Madigan for nearly 40 years. Before going into PR, Brown was an award-winning political writer, investigative reporter, and the first full-time Statehouse Bureau chief for the Daily Herald newspapers. He also served as director of intergovernmental affairs for the City of Chicago during Mayor Jane Byrne's tenure.