



Congressional Communication Managers' Roles, Motivations and Messages Related to U.S. Foreign Policy

Edward J. Downes, Boston University, USA

Abstract

This analysis provides a broad overview of the roles, motivations and messages of the United States Congress' 500+ press secretaries/communications managers employed by virtually every U.S. senator and representative. It focuses, in particular and for the first time, on their communications related to U.S. foreign (as opposed to domestic) policies. Doing so it summarizes select findings from a book the author has written, the prospectus for which is under review, with the title, *Press Secretary: The Story of Capitol Hill's Image Makers*.

The analysis reports the press secretaries build close relationships with the Members of Congress they faithfully serve; function best when practicing the Two-Way Symmetrical Model of public relations; use common persuasive techniques employed by public relations specialists worldwide; stress "truthfulness" in their communications; practice a "wave model" when choosing issues on which to focus; experience new media's challenges and opportunities; and suggests their work ultimately serves the U.S. democracy.

The politician will be only too happy to abdicate in favor of his image, because the image will be much more powerful than he could ever be.

- Marshall McLuhan



Introduction

In the introduction to Fox and Hammond's book, *Congressional Staffs*, published nearly four decades ago, former Senator Dick Clark wrote: "Dependency on (U.S. congressional) staff is great. Domination, no. Dependency, definitely. There is no question of their enormous dependency and their influence. In all legislation, they're the ones that lay out the options." Roland Evans, in the same introduction, wrote: "Of all the sources of power in Washington today, the most nearly invisible--yet in some ways the most influential--is the congressional staff. A staff of professionals is no less essential to the care, feeding and orderly operation of Congress than Merlin was to King Arthur or Cardinal Richlieu to Louis XII."

Capitol Hill's press secretaries--found in virtually every one of the 435 U.S. Representatives' and U.S. 100 Senators' offices--are indispensable players on Congressional staffs. They are responsible for external communications, about both domestic and foreign policies, emanating constantly from the congressional office. In today's new media environment, via on-line technologies, their messages can immediately reach the farthest corners of our shrinking "global village."

Few in the United States (and fewer across the world) realize the press secretaries work full-time, meticulously crafting and delivering a politician's image. Their jobs, at their most basic level, are to make their boss "look good" before local, regional, national and, increasingly, international audiences. For good or ill, the United States' functioning and its place as the world's super power depends, at least in part, upon their behind-the-scenes work. Simply put: their words and images can angle world opinions about the United States. Members of the U.S. This analysis, based on several data sets noted in the next section, highlights select findings, exclusive insights, that speak to the press secretaries' roles, motivations, and techniques--not from the perspective of a U.S. based audience per se but, for the first time, with an international audience in mind. Thus, the analysis, for the first time, considers primarily these individuals' influence on U.S. foreign (as opposed to U.S. domestic) positions.

Methodology

It's interesting you mention that you found only 50 pages or so that discuss the press secretaries.... That's because we're really doing our jobs. The better job I do, the less you'll see my name or my face.

- 33 year-old press secretary with five years experience

The first published study on the press secretaries of appeared in Timothy Cook's book, *Making News: Media Strategies in the U.S. House of Representatives* (1989). The second as a chapter in Stephen Hess's book, *Live from Capitol Hill!: Studies of Congress and the Media* (1991). These two analyses, which total fewer than 60 pages, are the only published studies (other than the author's) in which the press secretaries served as units of analysis.

This analysis' findings come from ten studies its author has presented/published since Cook and Hess published their important works. A bibliography of these studies appears at the end of this paper. Following is a list of the research/data gathering procedures the author utilized between 1993 and 2014 to uncover, through the aforementioned studies and for the first time, an in-depth understanding of the roles, motivations and practices of Congress' press secretaries. The earlier studies were built primarily from data gathered from telephone and in-person interviews, a focus group, and two surveys. The latter were built primarily from



data gathered from telephone and in-person interviews with the press secretaries. All drew additional information from secondary sources.

- (1) 1993 First phone interviews with practicing press secretaries
- (2) 1994 First focus group with current and former press secretaries
- (3) 1994 First large-scale survey of practicing press secretaries
- (4) 1996 First in-person interviews with practicing press secretaries
- (5) 1997 Second large-scale survey of practicing press secretaries
- (6) 2003 First in-person interviews with practicing state legislative aides
who play the role of press secretaries for
state governments
- (7) 2003 First survey of practicing state legislative aides who play the role
of press secretaries for state governments
- (8) 2004 First survey of practicing governors' press secretaries
- (9) 2008 Second in-person interviews with practicing state legislative aides
who play the role of press secretaries for
state governments
- (10) 2009 First content analysis of Congressional websites
- (11) 2009 Second survey of practicing state aides who play the role of press
secretaries at the state-level
- (12) 2010 First in-depth, in person, interview with a former press secretary
- (13) 2012 First historical analysis of the press secretaries from a humanities
perspective
- (14) 2011 Second phone interviews with practicing press secretaries
- (15) 2011 Second historical analysis of the press secretaries from a
humanities perspective
- (16) 2012 Second in-depth, in person, interview with a former press secretary
- (17) 2013 Third phone interviews with practicing press secretaries
- (19) 2014 First content analysis of Congressional directories and related
documents
- (20) 2014 Third in-depth, in person, interview with a former press secretary
- (21) 2014 Second in-person interviews with practicing press secretaries
- (22) 2014 Fourth phone interviews with practicing press secretaries
- (23) 2014 Third in-person interviews with practicing press secretaries
- (24) 2014 Fourth in-depth, in person, interview with a former press secretary

Each analysis above--and consequently each of the ten papers/presentations--was built on the previous one/s. The result has been a growing, often seamless, in-depth exploration of the press secretaries' roles, goals and motivations. These analyses have deeply informed a 390-page book the author has written titled, *Congressional Press Secretary: The Story of Capitol Hill's Image Makers*. Its prospectus is under review by potential publishers.

Findings

Relationships with Members of Congress

I have to consider, about every other day on my job, that I work for someone who's been elected to office--who the people have put a trust in. Moreover, that someone is working for a federal government that, for better or worse, is the government that has been established by the people and our Constitution. And, uhh, it's a weighty responsibility....

-32 year-old Congressional press secretary

Rebecca Riffkin, writing for the Gallup organization only five months ago (December 2014) noted, “Americans' job approval rating for Congress averaged 15% in 2014, close to the record-low yearly average of 14% found last year. The highest yearly average was measured in 2001, at 56%. Yearly averages haven't exceeded 20% in the past five years, as well as in six of the past seven years.”

Despite these grim statistics indicating such low regard for the institution of which they are a part, the press secretaries share intense, deep, meaningful, long-term relationships with the Member of Congress they faithfully serve. They draw on the trust inherent in this relationship in their roles as Members’ unabashed promoters and most fierce advocates--and, to varying degrees, as their confidants, emotional supporters, sounding boards, and even teachers. They unabashedly advocate for the Members of Congress (hereafter, “Members”) they serve. And remain ever loyal to them. Most hold this person in high esteem. The vast majority believes their boss has virtue, a commendable code of conduct, and is an admirable person. Their boss’ image—whether on display in a local news interview or broadcast worldwide--is seldom uninfluenced by, and is often shaped significantly by, the Member’s press secretary. Whether managing communication about issues ranging from the “very local” (such as those related to farm subsidies or tax breaks for small businesses) to the “very international” (such as those related to military intervention or foreign aide), it is important to always remember any power the press secretaries have comes only from their attachment to the Member of Congress they serve.

Relationships with Traditional Media

Although we’re in the age of blogging and [social media](#), being featured in the traditional [media](#) (TV, print and radio) is still tremendously important. In many ways it’s even more important than it was a decade ago. The recognition factor that traditional media offers is immense. Most consumers will be able to recognize and identify popular newspapers, magazines or TV station much more readily than then will the most popular blogs. The traditional media have built credible brands that carry weight, influence and credibility.

- Anthony Mora

The Two-Way Symmetrical Model

Good press secretaries, public relations theory tells us, would build solid relationships with reporters through "conversing with" rather than "talking at" them--regardless of whether a reporter works for the local college radio station or an international media outlet such as the British Broadcasting Corporation. The most effective press secretaries tend to listen to the journalists; they seek compromise when necessary; and they strive for mutually beneficial outcomes. In other words, many of the best press secretaries practice the "Two-Way Symmetrical" model of public relations scholars tell us often works best. The advantage of practicing this model over others is referenced throughout James Grunig’s seminal book, *Public Relations and Communication Management* (1992). Its pluses and prominence are also referenced and countless peer-reviewed articles.

The Essential Role as Spokesperson

Whether a U.S. senator (of which there are 100--two in each of the 50 states) or U.S. House representative (of which there are 435--one for roughly every 700,000 constituents in a congressional district) hundreds of individuals want that politician’s time and attention. Chief among them traditional reporters. Since it is impossible for Members of the Senate and



of the House to speak with all these people, their press secretaries often serve as their spokespersons. In this role, whether addressing local or international journalists, the press secretaries must be “right-up-to-the-date” on their boss’s political positions--particularly as an issue comes to fruition, is compromised upon, and is finalized for a vote.

While communicating about a Member’s decisions, both mundane and grave, Congress’ press secretaries dutifully go about their jobs amid the ebbs and flows of the nation’s political communications emanating from Capitol Hill and reaching the corners of the globe. It is no surprise, therefore, that most press secretaries have an extensive breadth of knowledge of events ranging from those involving a prominent business in their boss’ district to those taking place across the globe—such as those defending a vote “for” or “against” going to war.

And what is life like on Capitol Hill? In a word: fast. Behind the headlines on any given day in the nation's capital there are a thousand sub-plots taking form: the Member of Congress and her staff working at breakneck pace to prepare a bill to reform Federal education programs; a last minute compromise to pass a key piece of legislation; a House member positioning himself for a run for even higher office; a reporter about to break a big story about a new scandal. The environment is continually changing, and the confluence of national politics, local interests, ambitions, and personal agendas creates a sense of constant flux and excitement.

- Vault, Career Intelligence

In a five-minute period, press secretaries may promote how their boss found a lost social security payment for single constituent and, a couple minutes later, about why their boss supported sanctions against a foreign government.

Always (Always) Truthful

Regardless of the gravity, breadth, depth, or geographical considerations related to the issues press secretaries address, honesty and truthfulness, when it comes to their communications with reporters and others, remains paramount. A consistent theme across the author’s interviews between 1992 and 2014--regardless of whether the issue under discussion was the most mundane of local issues or the most profound with worldwide implications---was press secretaries’ stressing they must not lie. The follow quotations (in which the names were changed) taken from interviews the author conducted in the late 1990’s would be just as readily be spoken by today’s press secretaries: Jonathan said, “You just simply cannot lie to a reporter. I've seen people do it for short-term gain and it turns out to be a disaster. You never win a reporter's trust again.” Charlie said, “Look, you're only as good as your last phone call.... The first rule that any press secretary has to learn, regardless, is two words: never lie. Period.” And Denise, said “Be honest, be direct, never be deceitful, or never lie to a reporter.”

The “Wave”

How do press secretaries determine which issues (here, international ones)--ranging from those involving everything from Mexican immigration, to the changing Chinese economy, to worldwide cyber-threats--to focus their attention on? By jumping on and off “waves”.... A “wave,” as described by the press secretaries, represents one of many political issues, either foreign or domestic, on which a press secretary can focus. When these issues, these “waves,” come before the public--that is, when they are “in the news”—Members do something: They



"ride" waves when doing so serves their interest and avoid riding waves that might hurt. Thus a member on the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations or the U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs might more likely "jump" on international issues (waves) more quickly than one whose focus (or committee assignments) dealt primarily with domestic issues.

The majority of Members (and, thus, the majority of press secretaries) pay attention to those issues (those "waves") on the front burner of American's consciousness. In regard to international issues, for example, in recent times most press secretaries had to be sure they were generally familiar with the pros and cons (as well as their boss' positions) on issues related to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to Somalia; President Obama's work in the Middle East; U.S.-Japan relationships; nuclear agreements; U.S. warships in foreign ports; et al. Conversely, they might ignore other international issues ("waves") with life and death consequences (such as those related to global genocides or famines) which are not on the news agenda.

Five Persuasive Techniques

Following are five persuasive techniques many press secretaries use to convince audiences across the U.S.--and across the globe--that the Member they serve has made the right decision. They are surprisingly simple practices to understand. And easy to use. They make their way not only into conversations the press secretaries have with reporters and others, but also into the materials they create, ranging from news releases to speeches. It is important to point out, however, that persuasive/rhetorical techniques (such as those discussed next) are sometimes culturally specific. Thus they may need to be modified or even ignored when utilized for audiences for select global audiences.

Tactic 1: Succinct Explanations: Press secretaries favor brief explanations. Thousands of journalists across the developed and developing world are busy and work on deadline. Few have time to waste. And these journalists, regardless of their home country, are seldom scholars, lawyers, or historians in need of deep analyses. Knowing this, good press secretaries can--on the telephone, in an email, in a text, via Skype or other on-line channels, as well as in most types of promotional materials--succinctly explain, in a few seconds, a complicated decision the Member has made.

Tactic 2: Hooks: Press secretaries often have at least one news "hook" to entice whoever they are trying to convince of their boss's thinking. "Hooks" are an angles, catch phrases, enticements. They get reporters' (and others') attention. Oftentimes, if a traditional reporter is not interested in a story--no matter how remarkable, dire or meaningful that story might be in the press secretary's eyes--it will seldom be covered. Thus, that reporter must sometimes be "hooked in."

Tactic 3: Talking Points: Press secretaries use "talking points" to persuade reporters to buy into what those press secretaries want us to buy into. Generally speaking, these are carefully constructed words or brief phrases, seldom longer than a sentence, that sound good to audiences. And thus move audience members toward the Member's way of thinking. Most are succinct (as a general rule, the fewer words the better); catchy (thus getting people's attention); easy to remember (through, for instance, offering a memorable statistic); and often stated shortly after the start of the interview (to assure they get into the conversation).

Tactic 4: Catch Phrases: Press secretaries use phrases we will remember; that is, phrases that "catch" our attention. Like talking points, catch phrases are easy to remember. What



differentiates them from talking points, however, is that they are more striking, more dramatic, more spectacular than talking points.

Tactic 5: Euphemisms: Press secretaries also carefully choose euphemisms to replace more harsh, less acceptable, or otherwise upsetting phrases. To illustrate how euphemisms are used, assume a press secretary is listening to her boss being interviewed by a prominent journalist. In turn, she hopes the Member will use neutral phrases or different words--that is, preferred euphemisms--in order to make otherwise tasteless phrases or concepts palatable, unpleasant ones amiable, unfriendly ones approachable, or ones evoking upsetting imagery more neutral. Euphemisms, perhaps more so than the previous four techniques, are especially culturally sensitive largely because of words/word usages varies among even relatively similar cultures.

Alan Harrington summarized well the justifications for using these techniques when he wrote, “Public relations specialists make flower arrangements of the facts, placing them so that the wilted and less attractive petals are hidden by sturdy blooms....”

New Media and New Choices

The rapid adoption and diffusion of new (i.e., social/digital/alternative/emerging) media communication channels have blasted open the world’s doors--within and among nations--opening the way for unfiltered, targeted communications across the globe. The following excerpt from the author’s book’s manuscript sheds light on the profound changes that have shaken the press secretaries’ worlds, both locally and internationally:

The 21st century on Capitol Hill has seen rapid changes in Internet-based and other computer applications. These have--immensely, incredibly, and immediately--shaken the worlds of Congress’ press secretaries: The blog search engine Technorati available to any press secretary currently tracks over 14 million blogs. iPhones do what cameras did, and iPods do what radios did. “Google” is the name of one of the world’s leading corporations as well as a verb. Press secretaries’ business cards displaying their name, the Member’s name, and their office’s phone and fax numbers, could soon (and might already) also show their IDs for LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, personal and workplace blogs, friendfeed.com, del.icio.us, etc.... Internet journalism anyone? No doubt, new media have brought forth a new message-sharing paradigm through which the press secretaries send and receive messages--written, spoken and viewed.

In a new media environment the role of traditional journalists across much of the world has been weakened. No longer do the press secretaries always “need” journalists to tell their stories. Using tools such as blogs, tweets, and instant messages, today’s press secretaries can bypass traditional journalists all together--instantly sending messages across to the person sitting next to them--or to the other side of the world--while skipping over traditional journalists. No doubt, the role professional/traditional journalists have played roles as the gatekeepers of information to the public have been altered dramatically.

This does not suggest, however, that traditional journalist do not remain the primary audience for many, perhaps most, press secretaries. Both "new media" and "old media" are always both on the press secretaries’ radar screens. Often in partnership. The most prominent international reporter is still important for today’s press secretaries...albeit probably not as important.



The “Digital Divide”

Many cringe when they realize that, while new Internet technologies allow “the world” to keep a close eye on Member’s of Congress, vast portions of that world are left behind. A discussion of the global impact of the press secretaries’ work would be incomplete without mention of the disparities present in the ever-broadening “digital divide” between the globe’s “information rich” (with access and the ability to use new media) and its “information poor” (without such access or abilities). And the economic and social inequalities that have resulted. Simply put: millions of people across the planet now have the chance, via the Internet, to access the press secretaries’ messages. And millions of others--who do not have access to such the technology or lack the skills to use those technologies (such as literacy)--never will. Neither the author’s research nor others of which the author is aware has suggested viable avenues through which the press secretaries might address this divide--only that it’s present. And pervasive. And growing.

Other Questions and Answers

With this analysis’ goal of providing a kaleidoscopic view of the press secretaries’ work and influence, yet cognizant of space limitations for an article such as this, following are a series of brief questions-and-answers. These will broaden further readers’ understanding of the press secretaries worlds, particularly international communicators.

How much expertise/background do today’s press secretaries have in international affairs?

Most press secretaries are formally educated with at least a bachelor’s degree. About a quarter have graduate degrees. The vast majority are in their late 20s and 30s. There is no requirement that a press secretary formally study international issues. Only a select few have academic degrees focusing on international issues and only a small number have taken coursework in international relations. Within the Member’s office, however, legislative staff specialize in foreign affairs and, thus, serve as resources for the press secretaries on global issues.

Do press secretaries promote positions—such as those to support a controversial foreign leader--in which they, personally, do not believe?”

With few exceptions, press secretaries put aside their personal views and, in turn, promote those views--unabashedly--of the Member they serve. Most, however, are very much “in sync” with their boss’ views, especially on the major or highly controversial issues of the day. It would be highly unusual, for example, for a press secretary who personally supports Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to work for a Member on the other side in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

What do the press secretaries think of the concept of “spinning” messages--especially via the Internet’s ability spread messages to an increasingly global audience?

Press secretaries readily concede they are often labeled “spin doctors.” In the words of one, “that’s just how it is.” Many would prefer, however, to be thought of not as “spin doctors” but instead as, say, “providers of necessary, imperative information that is required for an informed--and hence a healthy democracy.” This applies equally whether the press secretary is discussing international or domestic issues.



How rapidly are the press secretaries integrating on-line and new/social/alternative media into their work?

Many U.S. and globally-based companies, international NGOs, and other entities have adopted new technologies much faster than many congressional offices. Since each press secretary's office is an independent employer, the speed, focus and sophistication with which any office, and thus any press secretary, is adopting these media varies significantly among offices. What is clear among all of today's press secretaries, however, is that new media are profoundly changing what it means to "communicate from Capitol Hill" with the ability to do instantly with audiences "across the globe."

Discussion

Good for Democracy?

Information is the currency of democracy.

- Thomas Jefferson

Is press secretaries' work--pejoratively, as mentioned, labeled the work of "spin doctors"--good for democracy? While the answer has no consensus, consider the following: Democracy (here, the U.S. democracy) is well-served when a fair-minded reporter consults a press secretary who vigorously shares his or her boss's position with that reporter. If, after listening to the press secretary, the reporter in turn seeks out an opposing source of information and considers carefully that opposing view prior to producing a story, this "balancing act" produces as fair and balanced a story as possible. And democracy is likely well served.

Imperfect as such a scenario is, and complicated by the rise of citizen journalists, if both press secretaries do their jobs well (that is, if they vigorously advocate for their boss) and if reporters do their jobs well (that is, seek out opposing points-of-view and produce balanced stories absent their personal biases), messages shared with the citizenry have verity, a nation is well served, and democracy's mechanism can work effectively--thanks, in part, to the information provided by Capitol Hill's "spin doctors"?



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