



Notes from the Lunch & Learn Forum

Covering the State Department: A Conversation with Bullpen Journalists

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Speakers:

Matt Lee, Associated Press Diplomatic Writer

Barbara-Plett Usher, BBC State Department Correspondent

Felicia Schwartz, Foreign Affairs Reporter, Wall Street Journal

Abigail Williams, State Department Producer for NBC News

**** The views presented by the panelists are their own and do not represent the views of their news organizations or of the U.S. Government. Please note that the following is not a transcript or a set of quotations, but rather paraphrased set of notes. ****

Panelist presentations

Matt Lee (AP)

The last 15-16 months have been trying. Partly because of media-averse style of the previous secretary, partly due to the mercurial nature of the administration. When top officials issue statements that are at odds and leadership makes little effort to explain its thinking publicly, it is very difficult for the press corps to explain U.S. policy to the broader public. Looking forward to a change in approach to media and public diplomacy in general that Secretary Pompeo may bring. Condoleezza Rice was an immensely effective Secretary because she had President Bush's ear. He trusted her instincts and she was able to persuade him to engage on policy fronts that got lesser attention during his first term. Hoping Pompeo will have a similar effect.

Barbara Plett-Usher (BBC)

BBC's biggest bureaus are in India and Kenya. Washington is the biggest English language bureau, producing mostly TV and radio content. Here in U.S., we have no dog in the political fight. Our role is to explain to the rest of the world what U.S. policy is and how it affects the rest of the world. The value of the State correspondent is to provide context to the policy-making process. Beyond official quotes and statements – which we certainly read and report on – it is helpful to have behind the scenes engagement. If we cannot confirm whether U.S. officials are even working on or thinking about a particular issue, the outside world will think the U.S. is either not paying attention or acting capriciously. Since that's almost certainly not an impression U.S. leaders would like to give, if behooves the Department to engage journalists at that level.

Abigail Williams (NBC)

Many journalists enter the profession because they want to explain complicated policy issues to a lay audience, such as family and friends back home. That is hard to do with a 24-hour news cycle because of the relentless pace of news. For television, we try to create a narrative arc and a visual because stories and images help to break down the complexities of foreign policy. That's one of the reason the Department Press Briefing is so important, because it provides those images and story lines. As a producer, I also support more than 20 correspondents around the country. If I can't get them timely information, they can't explain the news to our viewers.

Felicia Schwartz (Wall Street Journal)

We are always working on print and digital deadlines. Stories have multiple versions, so there are different spots along the way where the Department can engage. When the president tweets about foreign policy, we are going to write about it, so we need as much context and information as possible. The job has changed since the prior administration. When John Kerry was Secretary, I was on the road 50% of the time. That wasn't the case under Secretary Tillerson. I don't always sit in the bullpen and I am not able to attend every Department Press Briefing, but the briefing certainly shapes our reporting. Beyond the briefing, wonkiness and the "diplo-speak" of official statements doesn't always cut it for a lay audience. If you want our readers to understand U.S. policy, you have to explain those statements to us in plain English so that we can in turn explain U.S. policy to the general public.

Q&A Session

On working together as a press corps

- This beat is the best because of the other reporters. Yes, it's competitive, but it's very collegial. When we're on the road, we see each other more than family. Until recently, this was the most travel-intensive beat in Washington.
- People on the State beat like foreign policy. We're a self-selected bunch. This is not a stepping-stone to something else. We want to be here.
- We help each other talk it out when working on complex issues.

On the frequency of Department Press Briefing (DPB)

- Two per week is not enough. Four or five would be preferable. It seems the reduced briefing schedule was driven by the previous Secretary, not the White House. So there is hope that will change soon.
- Two days a week means a buildup of questions, which makes it harder to get your question in, and leaves no time for second- or third-tier topics.
- U.S. example of briefing five days a week sets the standard for other MFAs. It appears that China's MFA began giving briefings because the U.S. does.

- An effective spokesperson needs access to the Secretary. If that access doesn't exist, then a spokesperson can't speak confidently for the Secretary. No number of press briefings can bridge that gap.
- Frequent briefings are crucial for TV. We need those top line clips.
- Even if an individual journalist doesn't attend five days a week, it helps to get the basic info out every day to keep the USG point of view at the top of the story. If you're not commenting, we'll get comments from someone else.
- On-the-record remarks mean a lot, especially in today's leaky environment.

On pooled reporting and travel

- It was counterproductive to limit the number of reporters on the Secretary's plane. Please don't make us do this. Every minute we spend fighting over numbers is a minute we do not spend explain U.S. policy to the public. There's room on the plane; let journalists come. We used to have 13 seats. Pooled reporting means you have less time for your own reporting and writing and can lead to sloppiness.
- Please think about journalists' logistics when planning a trip. If you have back-to-back press avails, how are you getting the journalists from one event to the next (with equipment, etc.)? We need someone from Public Affairs on the plane to help coordinate these things and de-conflict.
- Also remember we need filing time. You can't conclude the trip with a press conference, then rush us onto a plane and not provide Wi-Fi. Then we're in the air for 5+ hours and we haven't been able to file the story about that trip wrap-up presser. The result is the U.S. cedes the narrative about the trip to its competitors, because the press from whatever country S is visiting files first and U.S. diplomatic press corps misses the news cycle.

On RT designation as foreign agent

- Generally very uncomfortable with this designation.
- There are arguments for and against, but this is a slippery slope, if you are singling out one or two state-funded outlets and not others. Russia and China are not the only ones. BBC is, too. No debate about BBC's credentials. What about VOA? Concerned this decision will lead to greater restrictions on U.S. outlets based on reciprocity.
- Feeds into the narrative that all journalists are spies, which some governments allege. This is dangerous for all journalists.
- Open debate and responding to less credible outlets is better.

On confirming news that breaks on social media

- If @realDonaldTrump tweets it, it's confirmed. Sometimes feel like news cycle is governed by POTUS tweets, because HQ always wants a story on it.

- The amount of info coming in on social media is insane and exhausting to track down. Really hard to separate fact and fiction. Everyone is seeing the same tweets and rushing to confirm, which means competition is intense.
- BBC had a whole team to verify videos from citizens in Syria and monitoring ISIL, etc. But they have become much more vigilant about fake Twitter accounts since 2016.

On getting the U.S. line in a story

- You can't expect to be taken seriously on the world stage if you're silent. You cede the narrative and it makes the country weak.
- Everyone wants to know what the U.S. position is. If your country is mentioned at the DPB, it's a big deal.
- If the Department can confirm something quickly, that's excellent - saves some work. But if it takes too long, we will work to corroborate with other sources. If what is breaking is inaccurate, please get out quickly to correct it. It's frustrating when you suspect that the reporting is inaccurate, but can't get a response from the building.
- We recognize your clearance process, but will move on if we get nothing.

On usefulness of toppers

- Useful when briefings are plentiful, but if there are only two 30-45 minute briefings a week, they will be ignored. We're scrambling to get big questions answered.
- Topper works well for TV.

On talking to big PA vs. regional bureaus

- Prefer to go to regional bureaus first, but PA puts the fear of God into you all.
- Regular contact is very helpful. AF had regular "sundowners" with the A/S and other key people. Some on, some off the record or on background. Opportunity to get more details on a burning issue and more context on policy development and on the Department.
- The approved on-the-record lines are fine for including in a daily story, but are sometimes opaque. An off-the-record/background explanation of the line that gets beyond "diplo-speak" is even more useful for helping us put that line in context in our story.
- We are not a gotcha press corps. We want you to help us understand the policy so we can explain it accurately. We respect your ground rules.