

## Chapter 10

# The Electronic Press Release and Government-Press Relationships



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Reporter sitting at video display terminal

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# The Electronic Press Release and Government-Press Relationships

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## SUMMARY

Although the Federal Government disseminates information through several means, the largest cross section of the U.S. population receives its government information via the press. Some Federal agencies have begun to design electronic mail systems to distribute press releases and other time-sensitive information (such as crop reports, weather bulletins, and economic and trade data) to newsletters, news magazines, and television and radio news broadcasters. If managed properly, electronic press release services could provide cost-effective and efficient alternatives or supplements to traditional messenger or mail delivery of paper releases.

The goals of this chapter are to examine current methods of delivering perishable information to the press, to explore a range of technological and strategic alternatives for electronic delivery of Federal news and data, and to examine the implications of electronic delivery for effective and equitable access by the press. To the extent that electronic dissemination by the Federal Government affects the ability of the press to cover and report on government activity, Congress has an oversight role to ensure that access by the press is enhanced.

At present, Federal agency use of electronic news distribution systems is highly variable, and the implications for equity of press access to Federal information have not been fully considered. The primary advantage of the electronic press release is timeliness, both for regional newspapers and media outlets, as well as for Washington, DC news organizations that otherwise would depend on the mail or expensive messenger services. In general, electronic press releases are more cost-effective than courier or messenger services. Also, elec-

tronic press releases can offer greater selectivity and more efficient archiving than paper formats.

Federal agencies currently use a variety of contractor-provided or commercial services for electronic dissemination of perishable information. Some of these services are provided in response to agency initiatives; others are provided by vendors purely as a commercial offering to the news industry.

The most important issue for congress to consider is equity of press access to agency press releases and other time-sensitive information. While electronic press releases could be especially helpful to smaller, out-of-town news organizations, the potential benefits could go unrealized if costs or technical barriers are prohibitive. The Federal Government may need to consider paying for electronic press releases entirely with Federal funds (at no charge to the press); charging the press only the marginal cost of dissemination (excluding costs of developing and maintaining databases); or establishing sliding-scale fee schedules for smaller or less affluent news outlets. At least for a lengthy transition period, dual format (paper and electronic) would appear to be necessary to ensure that those news outlets without, or lacking interest in, online capability are guaranteed access to traditional press releases and perishable data,

At the technical level, a number of alternative electronic press release delivery systems warrant consideration, including:

- computer-to-computer electronic mail;
- electronic wire services;
- electronic bulletin boards;
- facsimile transmissions; and

- electronic mail or wire services with abstracting, printout, and storage capabilities.

The latter alternative may provide a desirable balance between the visible, tangible paper copy offered by traditional wire services, and the selectivity and archival capability offered by computer storage.

Other issues that warrant attention include the need for a more complete, consistent, and

better coordinated approach to Federal agency electronic press release distribution; standards on archiving and quality control; and guidelines for involvement of private sector contractors in disseminating electronic press releases. Decisions about the future direction of Federal electronic press release services should take into account the specific functions and problems of agency press offices, as well as the current status of automation in press newsrooms.

## INTRODUCTION

Although the Federal Government disseminates information through several means, the largest cross section of the U.S. population receives its government information via the press. The recent General Accounting Office (GAO) Survey of Federal Information Users indicated that newspapers, newsmagazines, and newsletters are among the primary means by which the public obtains Federal information (see ch. 5, Table 5-11, for partial survey results). Since World War I, Washington, DC has emerged as the principal locus of news generation in the United States, reflecting the growing importance of the Federal Government as a major source of information to the U.S. press.

The press serves a unique intermediary function between the government and the public. It functions both as a "private citizen" or user of public information in its own right, and as an interpreter and disseminator of this information.

This chapter explores how reporters receive information from the Federal Government, and examines government press offices and press newsrooms—essential links between public information providers and private information gatherers. As these links begin to take electronic and digital form, a change may be taking place in the timeliness and even content of news stories.

The press obtains Federal information through a wide variety of channels (including

direct contacts, press releases, Freedom of Information Act requests, and published data and reports). This chapter focuses on press releases (concise, written summaries of news and data), and explores electronic alternatives to the traditional modes of distributing press releases and other time-sensitive information to the news media. While some Federal agencies already disseminate press releases electronically, participation is far from complete, and numerous policy questions need to be considered. The following evaluation of alternative methods takes into account the functions, problems, and status of automation in agency press offices and press newsrooms.

The discussion is based primarily on interviews with press officers, members of trade associations, electronic information vendors, wire service providers, and reporters, editors, librarians, and systems managers at small and large papers throughout the country. The goal is to highlight general trends and issues that warrant congressional attention, and to point toward areas requiring more systematic and intensive research in the future. Press offices, according to Don Obendorfer of the *Washington Post*, are "the junction point where the government and press meet. For most reporters, it's what it's all about—the clips, the releases, the briefings—and yet nobody ever studies that stuff."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Steven Hess, *The Government/Press Connection* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1984).

## FUNCTIONS AND PROBLEMS OF AGENCY PRESS OFFICES

When evaluating technologies or institutional arrangements involving the working press, a very important element to consider is time. The goal of a reporter is to maximize his/her news gathering and reporting in minimal amounts of time and to cover breaking news. The timeliness of press releases and their delivery can help determine whether a news story makes front page headlines or is buried inside. In the aggregate, newspaper and media coverage can help shape the public perception of the importance of events, and eventually mold the constellation of issues that merit public policy attention.

The functions of government press offices are difficult to generalize. Federal Government press offices are as varied in quality as are reporters' perceptions of their utility. The complexion of any given press office may change with each administration in terms of personnel, budget, ratio of career civil servants to public appointees, involvement in broader public affairs functions, and overall objectivity of the information disseminated. Within a single press office, certain individuals may win the trust of reporters while others function as agency apologists.

Aside from these significant differences, press officers perform similar basic functions: arranging press conferences, briefings, and interviews; and notifying reporters of events and publications through press releases, press advisories, wire service releases, and telephone calls. Most also serve a broader fact-finding and verification function. Like reporters, press officers have beats within their agencies, allowing them to become familiar with personnel, issues, and procedures in specific areas of agency activity.

An important, but often overlooked, function of the press office is the daily collection and circulation of news clippings to senior agency officials. Many government executives learn what is being written about their actions, their agencies, and their adversaries through these intensive doses of narrowly-focused

news. In terms of political agenda-setting, the clippings files have served to enhance the influence of the newspapers, particularly the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, over the broadcast media and also over papers from other regions. Some papers that merit attention have been excluded by clipping services due to their distance from Washington. The use of online dissemination has begun to change the mix of newspapers represented in the files, and could perhaps affect government perspectives on regional outlooks and issues. The White House has subscribed to a computerized clipping service since 1982.

The growth of the Washington press corps has heightened the need for press offices. Press offices serve, in part, to facilitate the government information function in the form of press conferences, briefings, and the distribution of prepared materials. As government grows, bureaucracies become increasingly difficult for reporters to cover; the press office performs a coordinating and frequently centralizing function at the press-government interface. It also may serve as a buffer to discrimination in reporting. While reporters often seek to bypass press offices and contact technical and policy staff directly, access to top officials is generally accorded largely to reporters from the most prestigious and well known media outlets. Press offices, on the other hand, are mandated to respond to diverse news organizations. Although some degree of discrimination may occur even here, these offices serve to institutionalize at least some degree of access by all members of the press.<sup>2</sup>

Most large agencies have highly decentralized press functions, with a department-level office answering to the national media. For example, all major agency components at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have their own information offices. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) press activities are separated both functionally and regionally, with separate

'ibid.'

press and public relations offices in different programs as well as regional NASA centers. Decentralization may complicate news-gathering tasks, but at the same time allows press officers to maintain closer contact with their sources within agencies.

A problem affecting some press offices that are attempting to create online release services is the competition for funding and control with agency Information Resources Management (IRM) offices. When the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1980 was enacted, the role of the press offices as potential generators of online services does not appear to have been considered. In several cases, IRM personnel have assumed responsibility for designing delivery systems to serve the press. IRM staff, generally schooled in computer programming and data processing, may have little or no under-

standing of journalistic perspectives and requirements.

The growing trend toward combination of press activities with public affairs activities presents another possible barrier to effective press operations. In 1981, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) instituted new job standards that require press officers seeking promotion beyond a GS-13 level to be trained in the range of public affairs functions. Public affairs activities include organizing exhibits, producing graphic and broadcast materials, conducting visitor and outreach activities, and developing advertising programs. These new job standards may serve as disincentives for trained journalists to apply for positions in Federal agencies. In a few years, it may become increasingly difficult to find specialized press officers in the Federal Government.

## **STATUS OF AUTOMATION IN FEDERAL AGENCY PRESS OFFICES**

In recent years, several Federal agencies and departments have initiated electronic press release services. According to the GAO survey of 114 civilian agency components (see ch. 4, Table 4-24), the following percentages of agencies already used or planned to use electronic means for the release of information to the press: electronic mail (28 percent); electronic bulletin boards (12 percent); electronic data transfer (13 percent); and floppy disk (7 percent).

The adoption of electronic news dissemination technologies is not uniform among agencies. Six brief examples are presented below.

### **U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)**

As a first example, USDA has undertaken an intensive effort to deliver news releases and other perishable information by means of electronic services. The effort was motivated, in part, by a desire to save on postage costs and to comply with the Paperwork Reduction Act and OMB guidelines.

USDA Online, produced by the USDA information office, includes:

- national and regional press releases;
- two-page daily briefings of news stories affecting USDA programs;
- databases on food, nutrition, animal health, and agricultural trade;
- agricultural statistics and economic reports;
- calendars of events;
- phone listings of USDA personnel; and
- an electronic messaging service.

Due to funding constraints, USDA cannot provide this electronic service free to the press, although free printed press releases and press mailings are still provided. USDA Online is available on *FedNews* through Dialcom, Inc., a commercial electronic mail service. To date, the service is used primarily by land grant colleges and universities, trade associations, Federal and State agricultural agencies, and farm bureaus.

USDA also maintains an independent, full-text delivery service, EDI (Electronic Dissemination of Information), which releases only perishable information. EDI was designed as a wholesale information service, contracted

through Martin Marietta Data Systems to sell USDA information to resellers or "multiplexers." EDI contains information from several of the USDA agencies. EDI includes crop and livestock reports, agricultural research reports, national and regional press releases, daily two-page news briefs, and other perishable information.

### U.S. Supreme Court

The Supreme Court is planning for electronic distribution of judicial opinions. The initial push for automation at the Supreme Court came from the press in 1982, by way of the American Newspaper Publisher Association and the American Society of Newspaper Editors. These trade associations were motivated by the demands of out-of-State news reporters who wanted direct and quick access to Supreme Court opinions. Supporting the request were the looseleaf and the legal database services, such as West, Mead, and the Lawyer's Co-op, which currently transcribe the full text of decisions from hard copy into their databases. Also supporting the initiative were State court judges and lawyers who believed that wire service synopses did not adequately describe opinions.

Supreme Court opinions are currently transmitted to the news media via paper. Prior to entry into online databases, such as Lexis, Westlaw, and BNA Online, they need to be scanned or transcribed. Reporters in the Supreme Court press gallery are the first to obtain copies of new decisions.

About 150 new decisions are issued by the Supreme Court each year. The Court provides 175 photocopies or "bench copies" of each new decision, and subsequently prints slip opinions (bench copies in a slightly different form) which are released two to three days after the opinions are handed down. More than 4,000 copies of each new decision are printed by U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO), including 400 for the Court, 225 for the Administrative Office of the U. S. Courts, and 360 for the Department of Justice. Slip opinions are provided free of charge to the press and public. Bound volumes of opinions, the *United States*

*Reports*, are available from GPO, about 18 months after the Court recesses. Opinions are also reprinted by commercial vendors.

The time value of electronic release would be extremely important for State and Federal courts whose verdicts may be hinging on Supreme Court decisions. Requests from Federal judges are currently handled piecemeal, and distributed by facsimile machines. Within the next several years, computer-aided legal research will be available in the chambers of all Federal judges; and as a consequence, the desirability of online transmission will increase. Legal reporting services currently receive the full text of opinions by mail or messenger.

Online full-text release of Supreme Court opinions would be of value to the press for several reasons. The instant availability of full text at remote locations would allow reporters to solicit informed commentary from affected parties as well as legal scholars. In addition to reporters on the Supreme Court beat, editors, financial reporters, and reporters on related beats would gain access to copies of decisions. Online full-text release would allow for broader participation in the analysis of decisions and their impacts.

Online release of Supreme Court opinions could have regional significance as well. When several opinions are handed down on the same day, cases of regional interest are often overlooked by the national newspapers and news broadcasters. Online delivery of decisions could give regional news organizations greater autonomy in reporting their stories. The Court is currently considering the possibility of working with a single, nonprofit organization to serve as a depository or disseminator of opinions at the lowest cost to the public.

### Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

Known by the news community to have one of the most responsive press offices in *Washington*, EPA has chosen not to employ an electronic news release system. Instead, the agency pays for regular messenger runs to about 50 publications in Washington and mails additional materials to media in other regions. EPA also mails

releases to any citizens requesting them, maintaining a current mailing list of 3,000. At its current level of computer sophistication, EPA has not found a system that is priced comparably to hard copy. After polling newspapers, EPA found that most were not adequately equipped to receive releases via Dialcom, Inc. electronic mail, a system that EPA relies on for its internal communications. According to EPA, only a small percentage of the larger papers can effectively use electronic mail releases. In addition, the trade publications that focus on EPA activities (e.g., *Inside EPA*, *Toxic Materials Report*, *Clean Water Report*) generally lack dial-up electronic capabilities. Although EPA sees flaws in messenger services (too slow for late-breaking stories, increased pressure to release announcements early), it still finds them to be an economical and thorough distribution mechanism. EPA does send releases to U.S. *NewsWire*, a new wire service that transcribes hard copy releases and transmits them mainly to the larger papers and bureaus in Washington.

### **White House**

In 1984, in an effort to reduce the voluminous paperwork involved in its media relations activities, the White House pilot-tested an online news release program with an exclusive feed to Dialcom, Inc. for incorporation into its electronic mail system. Controversy ensued, however, when other private sector vendors demanded equal access to this online information. The White House press corps objected to these services as a potential threat to their own viability, voicing procedural concerns about breaking traditional "rules of the briefing room" regarding judicious attribution of sources. Furthermore, some members of the public expressed propaganda concerns. Users of the system complained that the White House was slow to enter briefings into the daily system, making the service less valuable than expected.

The White House has since discontinued its electronic effort. Press releases in hard copy format are left in the New Executive Office Building for members of the nonresident press

corps. Transcripts of briefings now remain on file in the White House press room, ostensibly accessible only to the White House press corps (1,800 reporters). Nevertheless, White House briefings are independently taped by commercial newswire services (such as the *Federal News Service* and *Press Text*) that transmit the transcribed texts verbatim to clients.

### **Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)**

Although BLS makes its employment figures, Consumer Price Index, Producer Price Index, and collective bargaining settlements available online, it has found that the broadest segment of the press is neither equipped nor organized to receive electronic mail transmissions, and still prefers paper copies of releases. Most of its online subscribers are libraries and research organizations. Particularly in cases of embargoed release times (for the unemployment rate and the Consumer Price Index, for example), BLS has found that reporters prefer to retrieve hard copies at the agency press office and telephone their stories, rather than wait for releases to print from computers. Wire services also prefer this method, as they may be required to feed broadcast news programs which may be aired within a few minutes of these releases.

### **The Federal Election Commission (FEC)**

FEC provides detailed campaign finance information online in a variety of formats. FEC has made innovative use of its Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) infrastructure to satisfy requests from the press and public for computerized and computer-generated information. It merits mention as it has managed to keep prices relatively low for its users, including the press. FEC accomplished this by coupling its delivery services with its internal computer service contract with Digital Equipment Corp., avoiding intermediate delivery services. Connect charges and annual fees have been avoided, and FEC data can be accessed at an hourly usage charge of \$25. All the major national news media in Washington receive this service. Smaller newspapers may request pa-

per versions of reports that are free to requesters. FEC rationalizes its program as a spinoff of the FOIA process. Under FOIA, FEC has provided computer tapes upon request since 1980. The Commission subsequently added a dialup capability to the oper-

ation, which allowed them to provide the tapes outside of the FOIA process and charge user fees. Requesters can choose either to receive reports online, or download raw data into their personal computers to be reworked with desktop software.

## STATUS OF AUTOMATION IN PRESS NEWSROOMS

It is difficult to make predictions about future penetration of Federal electronic information dissemination technologies into newsrooms. First, electronic offerings of the Federal government are slowly and unevenly making themselves known to the media they wish to target. Second, newsroom technology is in a state of transition. It is difficult to predict whether newspapers will evolve in a linear fashion toward greater technological sophistication, or whether cultural and practical barriers will stunt technological growth.

During the seventies, the newspaper industry adopted computerized word-processing, editing, and publishing systems. With some major exceptions, mid-sized newspapers were the first to accept new technologies. The *Detroit News*, the *Providence Journal* and the *Des Moines Register*, for example, automated their newsrooms long before the *Washington Post* or the *Wall Street Journal*. Due to the cumbersome nature of retooling, a number of the largest papers are still in the process of automating various production and editorial functions. At the other end of the spectrum, the smallest papers, although computerized, sometimes lack the resources and personnel needed to handle large amounts of incoming electronic data. Automation in newsroom technology has grown out of the automation of production technology. Several large papers today are curious hybrids of obsolete newsroom technology and avant garde production equipment.

It is not coincidental that automation and consolidation in the newspaper industry both occurred during the seventies. Chain ownership has decreased the risks associated with experimentation and has been an important catalyst for innovation. Several small, chain-

owned papers have been selected as prototypes for newsroom automation. These papers generally are chosen for their secure positions in noncompetitive or physically isolated markets. The first paper to use electronic pagination, part of the electronic publishing technology that is revolutionizing the nature of production, was the *Pasadena Star*, a small paper belonging to the Knight-Ridder chain. Knight-Ridder selected another of its small papers to experiment with changes in circulation hours. Gannett, the largest domestic newspaper chain, has selected a small paper in Cocoa Beach, Florida, to experiment with new technological as well as editorial concepts.

An organizational manifestation of the computer revolution among newspapers is the growth in importance of the newspaper library, a central locus of online database retrieval. This centralizing trend is likely to continue as a means of controlling database retrieval costs. As database retrieval frequently requires specialized knowledge of different search protocols, the importance of the newspaper librarian is likely to grow.

As a group, news writers are slow to embrace new technologies. The legendary black Royal typewriter still maintains an elevated position in many newsrooms alongside oversized word-processing screens. Editors are less inclined to use electronic technologies than younger reporters who have grown up with portable personal computers.

There are two classes of information that reporters at some newspapers can retrieve from the computers at their desks: wire services and clippings files. Relatively few newsroom PCs are equipped with modems. Desk-

top wire access can be highly efficient. At the *Louisville Courier Journal*, reporters' desktop computers are programmed to segregate over 100 wire services into queues according to subject matter (sports, politics, Washington news), as well as type of service (AP advisories, AP domestic, AP international, AP Washington, Supplementary Washington wires, Supplementary international, etc.). Reporters can also receive Nexis, Vu/Text, and other commercially available news clipping files.

Computers in the newsroom have changed the process of writing and the substance of news. From the field, stories can now be relayed electronically between reporters and editors, allowing for quick turnaround time of edited drafts, and potentially involving more individuals in the story-writing process. This opportunity did not exist 5 years ago when stories were written on paper and dictated over telephones.

*USA Today* has revolutionized the newspaper business in its production and distribution technologies, as well as its format. The *USA Today* emphasis on short stories has made it dependent on wire services to a higher degree than most large papers. The emphasis on graphics in *USA Today*, facilitated by new technologies, has placed a premium on the inclusion of statistics in its incoming wire service reports, thus affecting the way wire reporters gather their news.

In terms of online databases, the innovators for the newspapers have been the full-text newspaper compendia. For example, in addition to Nexis, the *Washington Post* receives Vu/Text (regional papers), Datasolve (full text of the *Economist* and the *Financial Times*), and Data Times (newspaper texts and gateways to Dow Jones). The *Post* has recently expanded the range of its online subscriptions to include

DIALOG, PaperChase and Grateful Med (medical), Dow Jones News/Retrieval, Legi-Slate (congressional information), FEC campaign finance data, BLS releases, the *Federal News Service* (wire), and *US Newswire* (U.S. government news). It is soon to receive Wilsonline (bibliographic citations to journals) and Compu-Serve.

Small regional and local papers without Washington bureaus should be considered independently because their needs, interests, and resources are distinct from larger papers. They are particularly interesting to study in the technological context, because online technologies could open new communication channels and give them greater autonomy in reporting national news.

Today, Federal Government information is a relatively small fraction of the news of regional and local papers. This results from a lack of interest as well as resources. Small papers have become dependent on national wire services and telephoned news stories, in part because press releases mailed from Federal agencies to small papers outside Washington are both erratic and slow. Final copy is either reprinted wholesale from the wire services, moderately altered, or rewritten with local angles. The traditional wire services aim to satisfy broad audiences, often failing to cover stories of regional interest. Direct online access by small papers to Federal agencies could enhance local awareness of relevant national news.

While small papers could benefit substantially from the electronic receipt of Federal Government information, many are currently inhibited by a lack of data-carrying capacity and lack of financial and personnel resources to accommodate high-priced electronic offerings.

## **CHALLENGES TO GOVERNMENT/PRESS AUTOMATED DISSEMINATION**

### **Need for Coordination**

There is a clear need for better communication and coordination between those agencies choosing to disseminate press releases electronically. *FedNews*, offered through Dialcom, Inc., is the most significant effort at a consolidated Federal electronic news-release service to date. Eleven agencies currently offer news releases and other perishable information on *FedNews*, including: the USDA, Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Bureau of the Census, NASA, Food and Drug Administration, Department of Housing and Urban Development, Department of the Interior, U.S. Army, and Army Reserve. Releases are distributed unedited; agencies may determine the frequency and range of materials included. The *FedNews* menu allows materials to be searched by key words or dates; it can be scanned or read in full-text.

Decentralization in database and news-release distribution is a problem within and among agencies. All major agencies within USDA have created separate databases that could be made available online. Some of these are highly specialized. USDA's EDI system, the department only online service consisting solely of perishable information, receives materials from roughly half of the USDA agencies.

### **Need for Improved Communication**

Many newsroom librarians are inadequately informed about the availability of Federal electronic services, and there are no comprehensive indexes to Federal electronic services. A few agencies are aware of this problem and have made substantial efforts to stimulate public awareness. Both FEC and NLM (Grateful Meal) have held press conferences on their online services, outlining their range of offerings, costs, and compatible computer systems.

Another communication gap exists between newsroom librarians and reporters. While

librarians are interested in and trained in the retrieval of online information, many reporters remain uninterested or uninformed. As most reporters have not learned to use online services in daily reporting, library education and outreach must be energetic.

Still another communication gap lies between agency press offices and the private information providers who operate their services. Although service providers claim media subscribers, they rarely maintain adequate statistics to verify user numbers. Some providers sell first to "multiplexers" who then resell the services, making total client estimates increasingly difficult. Agencies could require that service firms track their clients more thoroughly and require that sales and customer statistics be provided.

### **Need for Completeness and Quality Control**

Online databases may be incomplete or inconsistent in quality. Even on *FedNews*, participation by agencies varies. Some agencies use *FedNews* as a regular release mechanism (USDA updates its entries daily), while others use it as a supplemental service with only sporadic entries. Reporters tapping into *FedNews* might not understand these distinctions, and might find the service unreliable.

### **Private Contracting and Price Control**

The tendency of private contractors to sell to other private vendors, or "multiplexer", can contribute to escalating prices and delays. Several issues need to be resolved: whether private vendors should be responsible for the delivery of public information and especially time-sensitive information like press releases; whether licensees or contractors own the value-added material they distribute; and whether agencies have the power to impose pricing or distribution requirements on licensees or contractors. Price escalation associated with the

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involvement of intermediaries could create pronounced inequities for small papers.

### **Potential Unavailability of Paper Copy**

The absence of paper copies of press releases could present a problem for some news organizations. Several Federal press offices interviewed by OTA cited the Paperwork Reduction Act as the principal impetus for ventures into online news release distribution. Although

most claim that online information is also available in paper format, this would seem to nullify some of the logic for initiating computerized distribution systems. Although it is clear that there is ample room for paperwork reduction in press release activities, reducing paper copies beyond a reasonable minimum could have a detrimental effect on the press, and particularly small papers that do not have electronic retrieval capabilities.

## **TECHNOLOGICAL AND STRATEGIC CHOICES**

### **Technological Choices**

Choosing new technological means to serve the press is not simply a decision for Federal agencies. Interest and technological readiness must be expressed by the media. In order to maximize the usefulness of new services, agencies must understand their potential clients.

The news media currently display wide-ranging levels of technological sophistication, varying according to type of media (newspapers, magazines, newsletters, wire services, radio, television broadcasters), size of firms, and ownership structures (group-owned versus independent). Media interest in new electronic services varies according to such factors as technological sophistication, proximity to Washington, and level of income.

In this era of technological transition, the most flexible services will be the most valuable. Some alternatives for delivery of information to the press are outlined below, along with a discussion of advantages and disadvantages to facilitate agency and congressional understanding.

#### **Hard Copy Release**

The most common form of transmitting newsworthy government information to the press involves the timed release of paper documents. When actively distributed, hard copy release is dependent on the mail or on messenger services and can be slower than elec-

tronic alternatives. It is necessary that paper releases remain available to serve recipients without computers.

Alternatives for hard copy release include:

- Hard copy releases sent by messenger or mailed to the press, accompanied by telephone "call-outs" to alert press about particularly important events;
- Hard copy releases deposited in agency press rooms for the newspapers' messengers to retrieve, or for use by in-house reporters. Hard copy mailings for out-of-State papers.

#### **Computer-to-Computer Electronic Release**

Computer-to-computer electronic mail is by far the most widely used electronic press release dissemination mode. The choice of electronic mail by most agencies probably results from the fact that this technology is becoming widely used for agency internal communications. Computer-to-computer electronic mail is not optimally suited to the press, however, as its contents are not immediately visible. To log onto an electronic mail system, searchers must dial a number, enter a code, and pay connect charges and hourly fees. Computers receiving mail-type messages are usually centrally located in newsroom libraries. As noted earlier, in order to control online costs, newspapers typically set up these systems so that access is not available from reporters' terminals. Electronic mail may not be practical for

perishable releases that arrive at very irregular intervals.

Computer-to-computer electronic release is best suited for the provision of database services for research purposes. One advantage of electronic mail is that it allows for selectivity on the part of the reporter or researcher. Contents may be scanned for useful documents. Other advantages include archival capability and interactivity. Menu-driven systems can be divided into subject areas that can be scanned or reviewed in full-text form.

As mentioned earlier, electronic mail maybe an important vehicle through which small papers can receive unfiltered news from remote locations. Full text databases for longer documents could place smaller papers on a par with larger papers that have easier direct access to the hard copy documents. While database services are impractical and often times too costly for reporters with daily deadlines, they can be of value for longer stories, or for newsletter, magazine, and trade publications.

Alternatives for disseminating releases via electronic mail include:

- direct online release into newsroom computers, through contracting agreements with private service firms (Dialcom, Inc., EDS, etc.);
- direct or-dine release to multiplexer who offer subscriptions to service firms (ED I);
- hard copy release by agencies, with private firms placing information online and marketing services.

#### Wire Services

Wire service releases may be better suited to daily news-gathering than electronic mail, as they can eliminate the necessity of entering computer files to check for potential releases. Newswires can be received either directly through reporters' work stations or in hard copy form via teleprinters. Wire service release of hard copy is a practical way to handle irregular information flows, and reporters are accustomed to watching wire teleprinters for printouts.

Three existing alternatives for wire service transmission of government information include:

- Hard copy release by the agencies, picked up by independent wire services that transmit Federal information over telephone wires to newsroom computers or teleprinters (US Newswire). Fee for the agencies, free to the press.
- Hard copy transcripts of press briefings picked up by independent wire services that transmit Federal information by satellite to newsroom computers or teleprinters (Federal News Service); local transmission the carried out via FM sideband radios. Fee for the press, free for the agencies.
- Online release of information to independent wire services.

The first option has been adopted by *US Newswire*, founded in 1986 and currently serving almost 100 news media outlets in the Washington area. *US Newswire* transmits releases and advisories over dedicated data lines leased from the local telephone company, delivering releases via teleprinters installed in newsrooms or directly into newsroom computers. The teleprinter concept can eliminate the necessity of searching directories for news releases. The service is free to the media. Federal entities are charged per release, so this wire service tends to be used for announcements with significant time value.

About 80 percent of *US Newswire's* clients have chosen the teleprinter mode of final delivery. Most newspaper bureaus use teleprinters, as do television and radio stations. *USA Today* has chosen to receive *US Newswire* along with other wire services such as AP and UPI into reporters' personal computers, while the *Post* has chosen to accept the wires via teleprinters, to avoid overuse of computers. *US Newswire* releases are saved for 24 hours, unless stored by reporters. *US Newswire* is distinguishable from *traditional* wire services in that it assumes no abstracting or editorial functions; it simply transmits releases as issued.

Several congressional offices are now offering information on *US Newswire*, along with the U.S. Information Agency, EPA, Department of Transportation (DOT), Department of Commerce, Department of Justice, DOI, HUD, and Department of Health and Human Services. The service currently costs \$150 for a release to 100 media outlets (and \$55 for release to a shorter list of 45 media outlets). This cost must be weighed against the cost of individual messenger-service runs to the media, and against message charges for electronic mail delivery.

The *Federal News Service*, another new wire service operation, uses a satellite to transmit daily briefings from Capitol Hill, the State Department, the Pentagon, and the White House to computers and teleprinters at media outlets. This is an expensive service for subscribers, yet Newsweek bureau personnel refer to it as "our life blood." Unlike the traditional wire services, *Federal News Service*, *US Newswire*, and similar services deliver briefings and speeches in unedited, full-text form. *Federal News Service* transcripts are placed online shortly after the time of release. The service will soon be available alternatively through Dialcom, Inc.

#### Bulletin Boards

Electronic bulletin boards have not been used extensively to inform the press about government activities. Within agencies, bulletin boards tend to be small, specialized, and little publicized. Bulletin boards may grow in importance in the future, for example to serve small newspapers wishing to be generally informed about a range of government activities, but not seeking Federal information on a regular basis.

#### Facsimile Transmission

Facsimile transmission allows for high speed relaying of individual messages to specific requesters. Facsimile is not appropriate for high-volume paper releases, but it is a necessary component of newsroom technology as it is widely used by those organizations that have

not embraced full-scale electronic distribution technologies. Congressional offices, embassies, the Supreme Court, and the Pentagon all employ facsimile distribution.

Facsimile is theoretically well suited to the press because, like newswires, it delivers a tangible paper product that is visible upon delivery. However, the routine use of facsimile transmission is not expected because the machines tend to become overloaded with incoming messages at press deadline times. If newspapers are using facsimile machines to send their own documents, agencies will receive busy telephone signals and perhaps miss their own deadlines.

#### Electronic Mail or Wire Distribution with Some Abstracting and Printout Capability

The most suitable technology for distribution of perishable information to the press would appear to involve some combination of wire service and computer communications. A blending of electronic mail capabilities with the automatic printout capabilities of a wire message would be well suited to the needs of the press. Perhaps the best electronic option would involve the printing of short abstracts when news releases reach the receiving computer system (this type of approach is currently used by the Washington bureau of the *Wall Street Journal*, when receiving *US Newswire*). Such a system could combine the selectivity, interactivity, and flexibility of computer storage with the tangible, visible hard-copy product of a wire service. Computer-to-printer electronic mail technology is increasingly available in the agencies, but most media outlets do not receive releases in this manner. Ultimately, each agency must embrace a mix of technologies to fit the varying levels of technological sophistication of the media they hope to reach, and to match the types of messages they wish to relay.

#### Strategic Choices

If Federal agencies choose to distribute electronic press releases, they have several strategic options available to them, in addition to

the technological choices outlined above. Criteria for evaluating the alternatives should address the potential problems and benefits for both agencies and the media.

Evaluation criteria for the media:

- cost;
- equity of access—services affordable to newspapers (and other media outlets) of different sizes;
- geographical flexibility—services extending to regional newspapers;
- speed—services received by papers in time for daily deadlines;
- accessibility—electronic press releases accessed in ways compatible with daily reporting activities;
- archival capability;
- thoroughness, uniform frequency, and centralization;
- flexibility of news releases (full-text databases, database-oriented perishable statistics); and
- maintenance of hard copy releases.

Evaluation criteria for Federal agencies:

- costs for electronic press releases versus costs of messenger-based and mail-based paper releases;
- interagency coordination in delivery of electronic press releases;
- extent of reach to media outlets—if service firms are involved, they should provide maximum coverage;
- ease of transmission; and
- speed of transmission.

As mentioned earlier, electronic distribution of government information to the press can have benefits in terms of speed, geographical coverage, archival capability, and selectivity. At the present time, however, electronic dissemination efforts by Federal agencies are limited. Among those involved in electronic dissemination, little communication or coordination has occurred. Further coordination and possibly centralization of these services would benefit agencies as well as the press.

Electronic press release services currently vary in quality, frequency, and technical and

institutional frameworks for delivery. Different strategies for marketing and distribution have created disparities in pricing and limited access for small and regional papers. The technologies selected for dissemination could have a major impact on the types of news organizations that will benefit from these services.

Federal agencies may choose active or relatively passive roles in electronic dissemination. Regardless of the Federal role, private vendors, on their own initiative, are likely to continue to collect perishable Federal information and provide it to the press in several ways, including: online database services; wire service releases transmitted verbatim and unedited or abstracted and edited; and clippings services. However, if all electronic press release activities are left to the marketplace, news coverage may be incomplete. Some media organizations, particularly smaller low-budget companies, may be unable to afford marketplace electronic offerings.

To the extent that electronic distribution of news releases (and other time-sensitive information) is judged to be desirable, Federal agencies may choose from a spectrum of arrangements. Selected examples are outlined below:

1. *Exclusive agreements with single private vendors.* Vendors would charge agencies for online services and also charge media clients for connect time. A potential drawback is that Federal agencies could become locked into paying high fees, and prices could become prohibitive for some media groups. Also, sole contractors might receive competitive advantages perceived to be unfair by other vendors.
2. *Online delivery of information to multiplexer offering subscriptions to clients.* Clients would include information retailers and selected end users. Concerns about high fees and equity of access could surface here as well. In addition, client tracking could be difficult for agencies, and services might not reach intended media users.
3. *Contracts with selected service firms or multiplexers, supplemented by provision*

of on-line information to lower-cost distributors. Providing alternative access through lower-cost vendors such as The Source or Compu-Serve could help address concerns about high fees and equity of access. This scenario could still create concerns for competing vendors about unfair competition.

4. *On-line provision of press releases to wire services.* This alternative might mitigate concerns about accountability, equity of access, and possibly high fees. It could also generate concerns about unfair competition.
5. *Direct provision of electronic information by Federal agencies.* In this scenario, agencies would place their news releases online and distribute them directly to media outlets. This could be fully or partially government subsidized. This alternative could help ensure accountability and equity of access. It could also raise concerns about governmental costs, unfair competition with private vendors, and possibly government manipulation or control of information.

Enhancing the effectiveness and equitability of electronic press release services will require the resolution of several important questions. One question is whether Federal agencies using sole contractors should be required to provide alternative access through lower-cost vendors. Another question is whether the use of intermediaries should be limited, in order to control costs and foster accountability. A third question involves pricing strategies. As noted earlier, pricing strategies vary significantly among the alternatives pursued to date. In the case of *U.S. Newswire*, Federal agencies pay for the service; the wires are free for

the media. In the case of the *Federal News Service*, the media pay; the service is free to the government. Both the media and the government pay for both *Fednews* and ED I. A decision that needs to be resolved is whether agencies should be required to create tiered pricing systems, including some form of price cuts or subsidies for small media groups, depository libraries, or public interest groups. Still another unresolved issue is whether greater collaboration among agencies should be encouraged or required, in order to provide "one-stop-shopping" for the media. This might require standards for quality, consistency, and delivery formats. A final issue is the preservation of hard copy materials. Even if electronic press release services are widely adopted, dual format (paper and electronic) would appear to be necessary to ensure that those news outlets without, or lacking interest in, online capability are guaranteed access to traditional press releases and perishable data.

It is clear that the electronic delivery of time-sensitive information raises problems as well as opportunities for Federal agencies and other Federal entities. As the use of electronic delivery modes spreads throughout the Federal Government, attention should be directed to ensuring that new technologies serve their intended beneficiaries. A growing media interest in using electronic newsgathering techniques warrants further experimentation with new systems by executive agencies, as well as congressional offices and Federal courts. But a diversity in levels of interest, income, and automation in the press mandates that new strategies be flexible, multifaceted, and accommodating.