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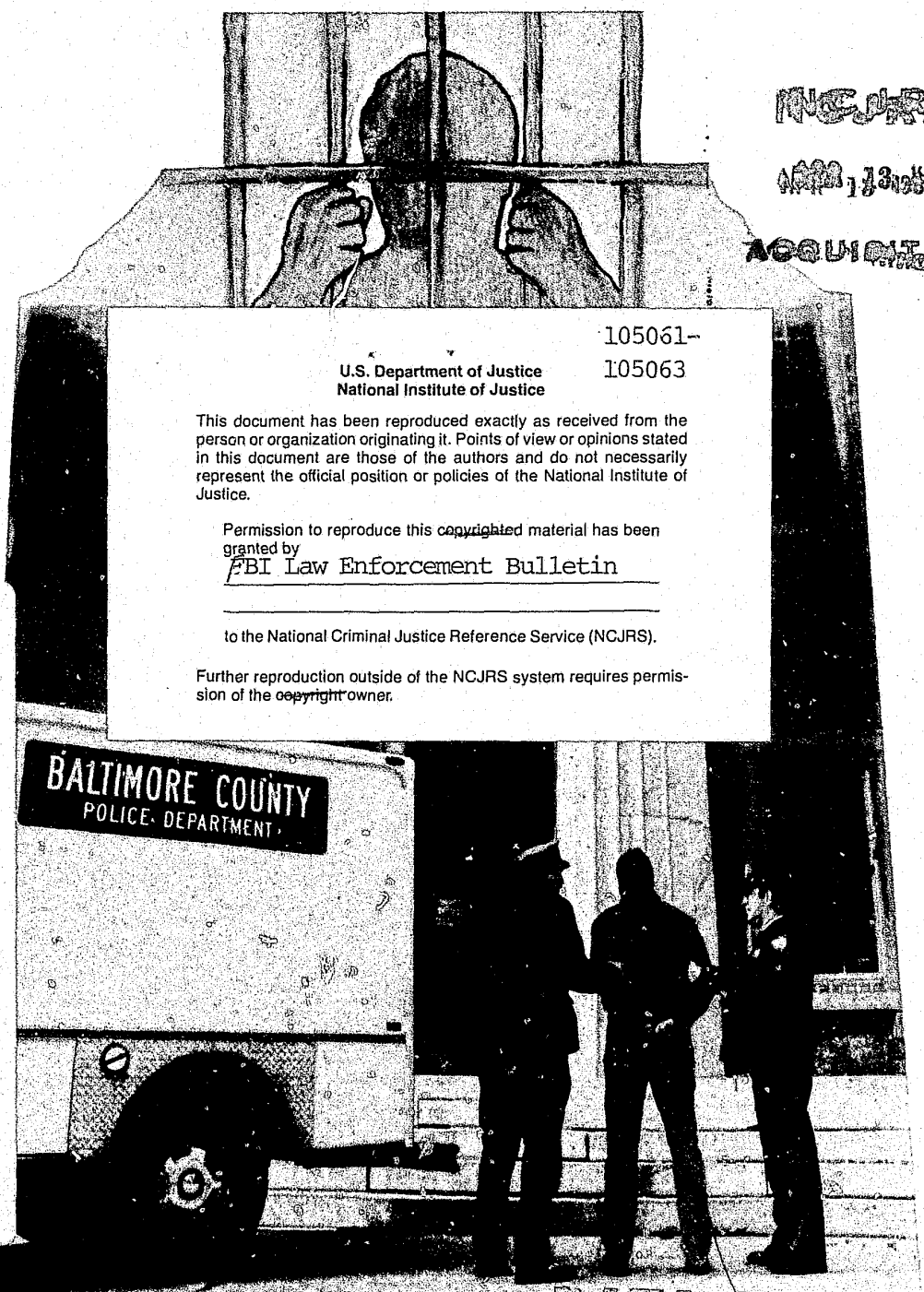

REPEAT OFFENDERS

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In and Out of a Question-And-Answer Period—SUCCESSFULLY

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"...it becomes vital to handle questions and answers from the press in a way that satisfies their needs and our responsibilities."

If you have ever conducted a press conference or briefed journalists, you've probably experienced fear. And when the floor is opened to reporters for questions and answers, that fear can sometimes be amplified to incipient panic. No one can eliminate the tension engendered when facing reporters, but you can bolster your professional image if you address that audience with the confidence born of preparation, knowledge of your goals, and concrete expectations of the media's behavior.

The reporters, with notepads, microphones, and television cameras in hand, sometimes take exceptional pleasure in asking embarrassing questions, ones which they know cannot be answered for investigative reasons. "Ambush journalism," especially as practiced by television's investigative reporters, has intimidated more than one police officer, knowing that statements made in the heat of today's battle will glow hotly in the cooled-down atmosphere of tomorrow.

Above: Police officers attending the FBI's National Academy receive training in how to address the media.

Special Agent Mount

Those of us who have had to make announcements concerning major news events have learned that the most dangerous time, the time when we're most apt to offer opinions where facts should be, is during the question-and-answer period of a news conference or briefing. Departing from carefully scripted news releases and guided by nothing more than common sense and hard-earned experience, we risk our cases and our reputations by allowing anyone with press credentials to ask questions. Journalists film, record, or make note of the sensitive, important responses that we give to questions we consider awkward and sometimes even arrogant.

That the press has a right to know how we handle our investigative duties is a foregone conclusion. Often, newsmen performing their jobs have contributed to informing the public about incidents that otherwise might not have come to light and should have.

Rather than have an important investigation jeopardized by a spoken error or to have an off-the-cuff statement haunt us at a trial, it becomes vital to handle questions and answers from the press in a way that satisfies their needs and our responsibilities. Experienced public information officers know that we must have some limitations on the amount of information that we release for "... excessive pretrial publicity can make it very difficult to impanel a jury of intelligent, responsible jurors, untainted by prior knowledge of facts or allegations in the case."[1] Conversely, the press must realize that they have been given all the information we can release without risking the investigation, sources, or a subject's legal rights.

While law enforcement agencies are not working at cross-purposes with the news media, they do have different perceptions as to what should be released. Quoting David Brinkley, "When a reporter asks questions, he is not working for the person being questioned, whether businessman, politician, or bureaucrat, but he is working for the readers and listeners."[2] You, on the other hand, have a need to protect an ongoing investigation, your agency, and the legal rights of the people involved in the case.

These two positions are not mutually exclusive. By following a few simple precepts, both the law enforcement agency and the individual news medium can leave a press conference and a question-and-answer period sufficiently satisfied.

Often, extensive preparation is given to writing and polishing a press release. A senior manager or public information officer then releases the finished product. It's critical to remember that the person presenting the information to the press is very rarely the investigator handling the problem. Thus, the primary law enforcement official who has the "best," most complete knowledge of the case is not the person who is briefing the press. This does not constitute a real problem, providing that the preparation for a conference consists of more than "rehearsing" by reading a copy of the release 2 minutes before presentation.

Reading a prepared statement is not your only obligation when addressing a press conference. The people to whom you are speaking, the reporters, see the question-and-answer period as their chance to get to the real facts. Many believe that they are duty-bound to dig for more information than you are willing to give, because "... the journalist knows that he is not simply an amplifier for the press releases of institutions

and individuals that believe they have something to say."[3]

After delivering your press release to the audience, you cannot relax because you believe the "major" job has been handled. Nor can you try to rush because you want to get the question-and-answer period over, nor can you get scared because the "hardest" part of your assignment is facing you.

What follows is a list of things to do and attitudes to adopt to help you to face the most nerve-wracking part of the press conference—the question-and-answer period.

Prepare

Highly visible politicians ask aides to prepare "briefing books" containing the latest and most important information about "hot" topics. Top business executives facing stockholder meetings also have them prepared. And so should you! The product that you, the person who actually faces the hot lights and banks of microphones, deliver is representative of your department's professionalism, and you have to be fully informed in order to know what issues to comment on and what to avoid. That knowledge should come from every section of your agency that is actively involved in examining the problem or case. As a general rule, accept only written information from those divisions that are "working" the case. The final product doesn't have to be grammatically accurate, typewritten, or even free of coffee stains and erasures. It does have to be the most accurate and most recent information available about the topic under discussion. Demand this written product with as much authority as your position allows.

After receiving all of the pertinent information, rough draft your press release. Be sure to mention the other agencies that participated in the investigation or event which resulted in the press conference. Prior consultation with prosecutive authorities will insure the release will not adversely affect any potential prosecution.

Brainstorm

Once you've received the written report of the happenings, assemble subordinates and peers who you trust to be objective and knowledgeable (and who are not necessarily friends) in a quiet room, free of telephone calls and disturbances. Give them copies of the briefing book. Allow them time to read the report (including a copy of the actual press release that you are going to present) and then "brainstorm."

This article is not the place to discuss the ground rules for "brainstorming." Suffice it to say that no idea is to be laughed at, no comment to be summarily dismissed. Essentially, the session should produce a list of questions that reporters attending the conference will probably ask.

What would I want to know if I were a citizen hearing about this event? That's the information that reporters are trying to gather, and that's what you should determine in the brainstorming session. Reporters may look for a "hook," a novel way of covering a routine story, but essentially they are trying to tell their readers/viewers interesting and informative details about fast-breaking news. They will make every conscious effort to develop "sidebar" material (interesting sidelights about the people and events taking place) on their own. Essentially, they simply want you to release all of the facts that you can.

After the brainstorming session, write your final release, have it duplicated for distribution to the reporters after your oral delivery, rehearse your presentation of the release, and prepare to face the press.

Intelligently Refuse To Answer Questions

Without a doubt, you are going to be asked questions that you cannot answer, so be ready. After assembling your list of projected questions, eliminate those that you don't believe will be asked and then make absolutely sure that you have answers for each of the remaining ones. That does not mean that you have to answer every question put to you with concrete information. A suspect's rights must be protected. Investigative methods and sensitive sources of information must be concealed. Physical and circumstantial evidence and witness' statements cannot be released to the press. But, for every question that you believe might be asked and to which you cannot respond ethically, have a reason for refusing. Prepare logical reasons and be ready to explain why you cannot respond. As Vernon J. Geberth said in his book, *Practical Homicide Investigation,* "... there needs to be a thoughtful policy of police-media relationships which provides for the integrity of the investigation and the proper dissemination of information to the public."[4] Reporters are reasonable; they recognize that some questions can't be answered, but they would be remiss if they didn't try to obtain all the information available. They will accept rational reasons for refusing to answer certain questions; they will not gracefully accept "no comment" answers.

Use Your Experts

Remember that you don't have to have all the answers. There are experts in your department who should be able to provide relevant information to you and sometimes even to the press itself.

" '...there needs to be a thoughtful policy of police-media relationships which provides for the integrity of the investigation and the proper dissemination of information to the public.' "

Keep a current list of who is in charge of each unit in your organization, and know who is considered to be the most knowledgeable member in each of those units. Reach out for people who can help you prepare for the press conference. Extract specifics and reject "I can't tell you that" responses. Like the reporter, demand to know why privileged information has been so designated and by whom. Remember, you are the person facing those bright lights and the barrage of questions from the media. Look at how television networks and news organizations use experts and "color" commentators to add informative, sometimes even contradictory, information to basic news stories. You have the same kind of experts available to you. Use them.

Thus far, this article has addressed assembling information and trying to anticipate the questions that you can be asked, because preparation will have a major impact on your presentation. Now let's move on to offering some tips on presentational aspects of the question-and-answer period.

Prepare For The Emotional Stress

If you are the person who normally deals with the press, you will probably know most of the faces appearing at a news conference and will be able to prepare psychologically for both the friendly and the antagonistic personalities. You can reduce part of the stress that you'll experience simply by being yourself. Too many people conclude they have to establish a contrived media personality in order to meet the press; what often results is a "Ted Baxter" type of facade. The textbook *On Television* even advises you to laugh at preposterous questions, if they strike you as funny.[5] (This doesn't mean that you should treat questions lightly; it simply means that you respond to press conference questions with human candor.) President John F. Kennedy often used his innate wit and sense of humor to respond to questions from the press.

If you anticipate that your story will have a regional or national impact, prepare yourself emotionally to face a bigger crowd, partially composed of personalities unfamiliar to you. Don't try to "play" to local reporters because you know them well and also don't ignore them because a "big name" television or print media personality is on the scene. Local reporters can and do ask the same type of penetrating, often awkward, questions as the "top guns."

Focus Your Listening Skills

Listen actively to the questions put to you and examine each question for hidden as well as obvious meanings. What "loaded words" did you hear? What emotional overtones implicit in the question call for a corresponding attitude in your response? Most of the skills associated with active listening come down to forgetting about yourself and then concentrating on the person to whom you are speaking. When anxiety is present, you tend to focus on what you're doing and neglect listening and watching your questioner. You become aware of the tremble in your voice, the sweat on your brow, and the difficulty that you're having in breathing. Consequently, you miss hearing the question that you are being asked.

No magical tricks exist to help you to become a better listener. Simply be aware that good listening requires you to want to know exactly what is being asked. Your desire to simply end the press conference when confronted with awkward questions may interfere with your listening skills.

Maintain Eye Contact

Look at the people in the audience. Remember that you are under pressure and that stress may limit your ability to think through all of the ramifications of a question from the floor. To help you control nervousness, focus your concentration where it belongs—on the person who is asking the question. If you are able to do this, you will be more capable of framing your responses. Maintain eye contact on the questioner. This will help you "read" the nonverbal communication that the reporter is emitting, pick up on any "hidden agendas" he might have, and force you to use your conscious mind for interpreting incoming stimuli. It also has the added benefit of telling the reporter that you are interested in his question. Finally, sustained eye contact will help you to avoid distractions—a major deterrent to smooth, efficient handling of a question-and-answer session.

Restate All Questions

Consider repeating questions to the person who asked them. If you do, you accomplish three things. First, you insure that you understand what is being asked, so that you can give a specific answer. Second, you insure that every person in the room understands what you've been asked and what you are responding to. Third, you give yourself time to begin to formulate a response. (Normally, the person who asks the question will give a head nod or other nonverbal sign that you have correctly understood his query.) If you are unsure of what information is being requested, preface the restated question with a phrase like, "As I understood your question ...," "Are you asking me if ...," or "What I believe you're asking me is...."

Define And Defuse Words

Always define controversial terms used by either a member of the press or by you. Defuse confrontational or argumentative encounters by selecting less highly emotional words. (You must also recognize that a person determined to generate an emotional reaction from you will object to your doing this.) To succeed in controlling the situation, you must maintain your poise. Remember that this is your press conference. There are always less sensational, less emotive words to choose from. Semantics are important, so be as selective as possible when changing words.

Do not use semantics to avoid answering a specific question. You will be on much firmer ground citing legal or ethical reasons for refusing to answer than on "waffling." If you have a reason for saying "death" instead of "murder," or of saying "unusual" instead of "suspicious," say so. Explain why you're changing the word, because you generally have an articulable reason for the alteration.

Answer One Question At A Time

Never answer multiple questions. If a reporter asks you one question composed of four or five different parts, point out its complexity to the audience and then either choose to answer the part of the question that you like best or ask for the question to be rephrased to require only one response. You don't want to get confused nor do you want the audience to be confused. Additionally, you want to ensure that no individual reporter dominates the session. By answering a multiple question, assuming that you remember it in its entirety, you give too much time and attention to one individual. This perception of favoritism or of having been manipulated will cause resentment in the rest of the assembly.

Look For "Traps"

Be prepared to face loaded questions. It may not happen often, because most members of the press are not nearly as confrontational or as rude as some investigative journalists appear. The normal responses to be expected from being asked an unfair and emotion-laden question are nervousness or anger. Try to avoid either emotion. If you think a question is unfair or loaded, say so and explain with as much detail as you think appropriate (which will generally be less than is actually required) as to why. If you perceive an underlying legitimate question, point out the essential elements that you disagree with, state the "real" question, and then respond to that point.

Deal Only With Facts

Support any opinions that you offer with facts and evidence. If you can't do that, either because of insufficient information or because there are legal, moral, or investigative reasons for not revealing it, don't offer opinions at all. Ego is your main enemy at a press conference. If you respond to an opinion question, you are allowing yourself to be flattered into stepping into a trap. You will often answer it, because you have strong beliefs in your basic investigative abilities, not because you have documentation or facts to prove your point. If you can offer a guess and then substantiate that with the word "because" followed by hard evidence, you may be able to avoid immediate or future embarrassment. Otherwise, don't speculate in front of a group of people who are recording your responses.

Avoid Disputes

Don't argue with anyone at the conference. There is an implicit "contract" between a speaker and an audience. That contract calls for you to control yourself and to refrain from misusing the inherent power that goes with being in the speaker's position. You may be tempted to wield your positional power to silence a person who is disputing or embarrassing you. Misuse that prerogative just once and you will find individual audience members beginning to sympathize and support that person who, like them, is in a subordinate position. Remember that journalists generally do avoid provoking you because they realize that an experienced agency spokesperson can overcome the aggravation caused by an antagonistic reporter.[6] When confronted with rising tempers, admit to your emotional state and offer to personally "discuss" the matter further at the conclusion of the conference. By admitting to a "weakness" and then showing your objectivity, you will generally defuse the situation and also obviate the need to have a personal meeting.

Admit Ignorance

If you're asked something that you don't know, don't bluff. If you can't or won't answer a specific question, explain why. If you don't know, don't be baited by the reporter who intimates that you should know. You are not conducting the investigation yourself, and there is no logical or practical way for you to know every piece of information being gathered by the investigators who are pounding on doors. If the question you've been asked is valid and the information is or will be available in the future, tell the questioner that you will call him back as soon as you can to

"Involve as many of the reporters as the time and situation allow."

supply the information. Then, get back to him—always. Even if you cannot provide the requested information, call back.

To help you to accomplish this, have a peer or subordinate in the audience make a list of those points that you've promised to respond to and the names of those who asked. You, who are under the stress of conducting that press conference, will not remember who asked what and whom you promised to contact. You need someone to perform this task, so make sure that a dependable person from your agency is there and assigned this important job. The most common complaint that reporters voice deals with the person who refuses to return calls after saying that he will do so.

Be Fair

Involve as many of the reporters as the time and situation allow. Select from different parts of the room and from small and large news organizations. To help you do this and avoid any one person monopolizing the conference, try the following technique. As explained previously, maintain direct, concentrated eye contact with the person while he is asking you a question. Sustain that contact when repeating the question, and then start responding to that individual. *Then* switch your focus to others. Scan the assembly and pinpoint others as you respond to the point which has been raised. Most importantly, make sure that when you finish your response, you are looking at someone other than the person who asked the question. This technique also allows you to forestall the "followup" question, so beloved of the press corps. Look closely at presidential news conferences and note how many times the recognized reporter has a multiple, complex, or series of inquiries. You can at least partially handle the problem of more aggressive reporters getting all of the questions by ending your answers with eye contact focused away from the questioner.

Be Brief

John Dryden, the English poet and writer, once said, "But far more numerous was the herd of such, Who thought too little and said too much." Don't ramble on; be concise. Remember the old saw, "If you can't be good, be brief. If you can't be brief, be quiet." Limit the conference to a preset time period. Stay within that stricture. Take time to think about what you're saying and then limit your response to the necessary facts. Have someone else on your staff ready to terminate the conference. You can always decide to continue, but by having a substitute, through prior strategy, terminate the conference for you, it is more effective and makes it look less like you are running away.

Summary

As police officers, you've testified in court. You've been cross-examined by defense attorneys who have tried to confuse you and to discredit your testimony. That courtroom experience has forced you to face one of the most trying experiences that a human being can undergo. Talking to a press conference, briefing people who are working against tough time deadlines, but who have the same kind of basic curiosity that you have, should not be an overbearing task. You can't avoid tough questions for "good investigative reporters take great pride in their persistence."[7] So, don't try to sidestep hard questions because you don't have to. Your trial experience, honesty, and conference preparation will allow you to explain, where necessary, and to refuse to answer when the situation demands it.

If you can remember to concentrate on the task at hand, to listen acutely to the questions asked, to understand the overt and hidden meanings of the words directed at you, to emphasize with the reporter's needs, and to keep your focus on the audience and away from your own nervousness, you should be able to satisfy the basic requirements demanded of a spokesperson.

When the pressures begin to weigh heavily as you are mentally preparing to enter a roomful of reporters and you are tempted to view the reporters as cynical critics, remember Edmund Burke's 1770 maxim, "To complain of the age we live in, to murmur at the present possessor of power, to lament the past, to conceive extravagant hopes of the future are the common disposition of the greatest part of mankind." The audience you are facing is merely responding to the needs of the reading or viewing public. The curiosity that feeds on details, the "need" to know intimate secrets, and the refusal to accept the necessity of confidentiality are not inherent in the news media, but are engraved in the nature of man.

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Footnotes

[1]Paul F. Fuqua and Jerry V. Wilson, *The Police & the Media* (Little, Brown and Company, 1975), p. 35.

[2]Chester Burger, "How To Meet The Press," *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 1975, p. 62.

[3]Joseph A. Califano and Howard Simons, *The Media and the Law* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976), p. 19.

[4]Vernon J. Geberth, *Practical Homicide Investigation* (New York: Elsevier Science Publishing Co., Inc., 1983), p. 321.

[5]Jack Hilton and Mary Knoblauch, *On Television!* (New York: AMACON, 1980), p. 68.

[6]Ibid, p. 39.

[7]Clarence Jones, *How To Speak TV* (Marathon, FL: Video Consultants, Inc., 1983), p. 99.