

## The <Mobilized> <Media

By A.B. Stoddard, CQ Columnist

As they afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted, most journalists have come to learn never to take a side — there's no cheering in the press box, so there should be no advocacy in the press galleries.

The exception, says Tom Curley, president and CEO of The Associated Press, is government secrecy. Curley and other industry leaders believe the new, mounting roadblocks to government information threaten our democracy. In response, some journalistic organizations are taking up the charge in the unlikely role of activists, pressing for legislative reforms they hope will preserve an accessible and accountable government.

“We do not sit in some impartial referee's box where open government is concerned,” said Curley in a speech last year, calling upon news organizations to lobby Congress for open government and free-press protections.

But the mere act of legislative advocacy poses a challenge to an industry that, by its nature, has no clear, monolithic interest. The daily (hourly) competition for news, coupled with the independent instincts of the people who gravitate to this profession, make concerted action a difficult, some might say impractical, proposition.

Still, numerous media interests are quietly and rapidly mobilizing their many forces. The American Society of Newspaper Editors, the AP, the Newspaper Association of America, the National Newspaper Association, the Society of Professional Journalists, the Radio-Television News Directors Association, the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, and the Coalition of Journalists for Open Government have together formed the Sunshine in Government Initiative.

Curley expected objection from some industry friends, but “in the great sweep of things it seemed to me the time had come to fight.”

The various groups have committed to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars in their initial push this year. After a com-petitive search, the umbrella group of media interests hired Podesta Mattoon to lobby Congress and the Aker Partners Inc., a public relations firm, to coordinate a public education campaign for a sustained effort that (they hope) will enlarge their coalition. “We are on the playing field here, and we have skin in the game,” Curley said.

The lobbying — bankrolled and executed by owners and publishers, and not by journalists — is hardly the kind of highly coordinated effort your typical fat Washington wallet buys. But it has yielded results. Earlier this year, Sens. John Cornyn, R-Texas, and Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., introduced a bill to strengthen the Freedom of Information Act,

which has come under increasing attack as government agencies close ranks in the war on terrorism. Identical, bipartisan legislation has been introduced in the House. In addition, Sen. Richard G. Lugar and Rep. Mike Pence, both Indiana Republicans, have introduced legislation to create a federal shield law to protect the right of journalists to keep sources confidential.

## **Big Guys Bow Out**

But even as some journalists conclude that they must actively combat secrecy in order to do the job of covering government, others find advocacy awkward and incongruous. There seems to exist an inherent tension, perhaps an outright conflict, in the Fourth Estate seeking to influence the way government behaves.

When Geneva Overholser, former ombudsman at The Washington Post, assembled a forum in March on secrecy at the National Press Club, Post Executive Editor Leonard Downie Jr. refused to attend. Overholser, now a professor at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, read Downie's e-mailed response to her invitation: "We just don't believe in unified action, and would find a discussion aimed at reaching agreement with others on 'practicable steps' or even agreement on when not to agree to various ground rules uncomfortable and unworkable."

Beyond such overt resistance, the story of secrecy's growth is underreported, written off by many in the press as an inside-baseball media topic. During Sunshine Week last month — a public awareness campaign in which hundreds of newspapers wrote about the public's right of access to government information — such large newspapers as The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, The Los Angeles Times, and the Boston Globe were noticeably absent.

Andy Alexander, Washington bureau chief of Cox Newspapers, decided last year to create the first full-time secrecy beat in Washington, but his was a first. "Washington bureau chiefs have been slow to recognize how big an issue this is and how it connects in America," Alexander said. "Ultimately, it's about a citizen's access to information, not about the press' access to information."

Phil Taubman, Washington bureau chief of The New York Times, recently decided to follow suit, adding regular coverage of secrecy in his paper's Washington report.

It appears that members of the press may soon let the secret out, even if they're not all on the same page.

*Contributing editor A.B. Stoddard covered Congress for ABC News and The Hill. She can be reached at [astoddard@cq.com](mailto:astoddard@cq.com). Next: Futurist, by Mike Mills.*