



5-1-1995

# Reporters and The News Media: What Tennessee City Officials Need to Know

Sharon H. Fitzgerald  
*University of Tennessee, Knoxville*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_mtaspubs](http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_mtaspubs)

 Part of the [Public Administration Commons](#)

The MTAS publications provided on this website are archival documents intended for informational purposes only and should not be considered as authoritative. The content contained in these publications may be outdated, and the laws referenced therein may have changed or may not be applicable to your city or circumstances.

For current information, please visit the MTAS website at: [mtas.tennessee.edu](http://mtas.tennessee.edu).

---

## Recommended Citation

Fitzgerald, Sharon H., "Reporters and The News Media: What Tennessee City Officials Need to Know" (1995). *MTAS Publications: Full Publications*.  
[http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_mtaspubs/58](http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_mtaspubs/58)

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by the Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS) at Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in MTAS Publications: Full Publications by an authorized administrator of Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [trace@utk.edu](mailto:trace@utk.edu).

# Reporters & the News Media:

What Tennessee City Officials Need to Know



By Sharon H. Fitzgerald  
MTAS Communications Consultant  
*May 1995*

---

## ARCHIVES Do Not Remove



**Municipal Technical Advisory Service**  
A statewide agency of  
The University of Tennessee's Institute for Public Service  
in cooperation with the  
Tennessee Municipal League

## **MTAS Mission Statement**

The Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS) was created in 1949 by the state legislature to enhance the quality of government in Tennessee municipalities. An agency of The University of Tennessee's Institute for Public Service, MTAS works in cooperation with the Tennessee Municipal League and affiliated organizations to assist municipal officials.

By sharing information, responding to client requests, and anticipating the ever-changing municipal government environment, MTAS promotes better local government and helps cities develop and sustain effective management and leadership.

MTAS offers assistance in areas such as accounting and finance, administration and personnel, fire, public works, law, ordinance codification, communications, and wastewater management. MTAS houses a comprehensive library and publishes scores of documents annually.

All MTAS publications are free to Tennessee city, county, state, and federal officials. There is a charge for all private sector requests. This handbook is \$5.

Photocopying of this publication in small quantities for educational purposes is encouraged. For permission to copy and distribute large quantities, please contact the MTAS Knoxville office at (615) 974-0411.

**The University of Tennessee  
Municipal Technical Advisory Service  
600 Henley Street, Suite 120  
Knoxville, Tennessee 37996-4105  
Knoxville: (615) 974-0411  
Nashville: (615) 532-MTAS (6827)  
Jackson: (901) 423-3710  
Martin: (901) 587-7055  
Johnson City: (615) 854-9882**

The University of Tennessee does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, color, religion, national origin, age, handicap, or veteran status in provision of education opportunities or employment opportunities and benefits.

The University does not discriminate on the basis of sex or handicap in its education programs and activities, pursuant to requirements of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Public Law 92-318, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Public Law 93-112, and the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, Public Law 101-336, respectively. This policy extends to both employment by and admission to the University.

Inquiries concerning Title IX, Section 504, and the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 should be directed to Gary W. Baskette, Director of Business Services, 109 Student Services and Administration Building, Knoxville Tennessee 37996-0212, (615) 974-6622. Charges of violation of the above policy should also be directed to Mr. Baskette.

Authorization No. E14-1050-00-018-95



# Reporters & the News Media:

What Tennessee City Officials Need to Know



By Sharon H. Fitzgerald  
MTAS Communications Consultant  
*May 1995*



**Municipal Technical Advisory Service**  
A statewide agency of  
The University of Tennessee's Institute for Public Service  
in cooperation with the  
Tennessee Municipal League

---

---

# Table of Contents



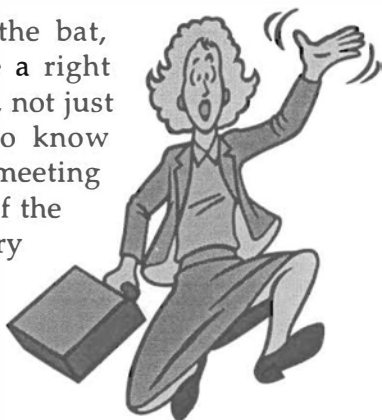
<b>Chapter 1.</b>	
Reporter on the phone? Why should I care? .....	1
<b>Chapter 2.</b>	
What is news, anyway? .....	3
<b>Chapter 3.</b>	
Act, don't just react! .....	5
Put someone in charge .....	5
Getting to know you .....	6
The ticking clock .....	8
The nature of the beast .....	9
The cable opportunity .....	10
<b>Chapter 4.</b>	
The successful interview .....	13
The interview for print .....	16
The interview for television .....	17
Speaking their language: a glossary .....	18
<b>Chapter 5.</b>	
One of "those" days .....	21
Some reporters just aren't nice .....	21
When a reporter gets it wrong .....	22
Don't bother me now. I'm having a crisis! .....	24
<b>Chapter 6.</b>	
Let the sun shine! .....	27

# 1

## Reporter on the phone? Why should I care?

---

Let's make this easy. Right off the bat, accept that your citizens *do* have a right to know the goings-on in city hall, not just the goings-on you want them to know about. In fact, Tennessee's open meeting and open records laws are some of the toughest in the country. There's very little that happens in your city hall, and scant little in your files, that isn't public domain.



Like it or not, government and the press are intrinsically linked.

It's just what the drafters of the First Amendment had in mind! But that doesn't mean government and the media must be warring factions, particularly at the local level. City officials and reporters can help each other do their jobs better, and it's in everyone's best interest to cooperate. Closing the door on the media is tantamount to closing the door on the taxpayers. Refusing to answer a reporter's question is the same as telling the citizens you represent or work for that you won't discuss the subject with them. To take that position, you better have some mighty good reasons. Reporters aren't a necessary evil; they represent a freedom that sets this country apart.

Reporters can be a fast and direct link to your citizens. If you work professionally with those who cover city hall, you'll find most of them to be helpful and willing to work with you to meet the city's communications goals. Most reporters are hard-working, well-meaning people just trying to do their jobs well and get home in



---

---

time for an occasional dinner with their families. Most reporters aren't "out to get" the city or you.

Your cooperation with the media should be just one link in a chain of strategies to reach your citizens with information they need about their government. Media coverage isn't a goal in itself — it's a means to an end.

The long-term goals are:

- an informed citizenry,
- an improved perception of local government,
- a positive city image, and
- a strengthened sense of community.

The journalist isn't your audience, your citizens are.



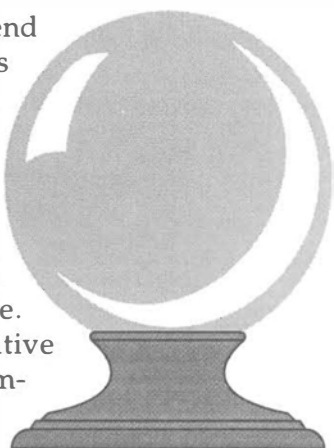
# 2

## What is news, anyway?

---

It's a constant lament of government officials: "Reporters only write negative stories, never positive ones." That's simply not the case.

Communications specialists could spend hours arguing the question, "What is news?" But, to a reporter, there is a distinctive difference between a good story and a bad story. Contrary to popular belief, reporters don't think a good story is a negative story. A good story is an interesting or useful story, whether positive or negative. Consequently, a bad story isn't positive or negative, either; it's trivial. The impact of a story is what makes it good or bad.



In fact, journalists are aware of the public's perception of the media as a doomsayer, and most reporters are praised by their bosses when they return to the newsroom with a light, upbeat story. To an editor or news director, news is information that touches the lives of readers, listeners, and viewers. Furthermore, research shows that media consumers remember the "feel good" stories long after the "crisis of the day" stories are forgotten.

News is about people. The story isn't the tax hike; the story is how the tax hike will affect *taxpayers*. And a story takes on greater significance as the number of people it affects increases.





---

News has another characteristic. It must be fresh. There is only so much space in a newspaper or time in a radio or television report. If your news is old, don't expect coverage. The news business is very competitive and news organizations must be "on top of it" to attract advertisers.

Finally, news with a local angle is a valuable commodity and, as a city official, that's your position of strength.



# 3

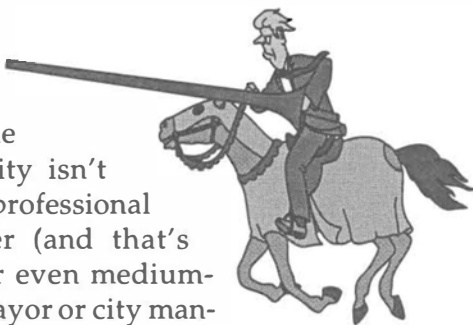
## Act, don't just react!

---

Good media coverage is a two-way street, a give-and-take between reporters and their sources. If media coverage in your city is slanted or superficial, it's not just the reporter's fault. The best defense, after all, is a good offense.

### Put someone in charge

Someone within your local government should have the primary responsibility for dealing with the media. If your municipality isn't lucky enough to employ a professional public information officer (and that's strongly recommended for even medium-size cities), perhaps your mayor or city manager should be designated as the primary contact. After all, responsibility for media relations is a hefty and important duty — and something that is everybody's job soon becomes nobody's job.



On the flip side, one person can't be an expert on all the intricacies of your local government. Sometimes the job of your city's media contact is simply to refer the reporter to the municipal official who's "in the know." That's why most city officials — particularly those in a position to be "in the know" — should be well-versed in the workings of the media and comfortable giving reporters the information they need.

If you're in a position to establish policy for your department or the entire city, steer clear of a strat-



---

---

egy that limits media access or prohibits employees from talking to the press. An open, honest line of communication with the media is a much better way to go. Sure, you'll get burned occasionally. Reporters, just like everyone else, make mistakes. But media-paranoia is unhealthy and contagious. If those who work for you know you weigh the political ramifications of every word in the morning paper, they will be nervous and wary when trying to help a reporter with a story. People who are terrified of making a mistake often make a doozy, and those who are *overly* cautious usually appear unsure of themselves. A hesitant, stuttering city official on the evening news doesn't engender confidence among taxpayers. Also, terrified people look terrified on camera — and the "deer-caught-in-the-headlights" look isn't a positive image. Relax.



### Getting to know you ...

Develop a positive working relationship with the reporters on your city hall beat. Some of your best coverage could result from a story idea that's yours and not the reporter's. Don't be shy; suggest stories often. Some they will use and some they won't, but the effort is worthwhile and appreciated. On a slow news day, a photo of the city's new fire truck could be Page 1 material. If your local newspaper publishes a Saturday edition, Friday is a good day to release "new fire truck" stories. So are holidays. Getting media coverage of controversial issues is easy; getting space or air time for the details of the new garbage pickup schedule can be more difficult. But it's essen-



---

---

tial to reach citizens with such information and working cooperatively with the media offers the best chance to use the media as a conduit to your citizens.

Know the nature of the individual press people you deal with. One kind of story might interest the local weekly's reporter, the father of two with a personal interest in the community. A different angle would perk up the ears of the stringer on the state desk of the metropolitan daily 40 miles away.

Help a reporter who's writing a negative story just as much as you'd help a reporter writing a positive one. That's tough to do, but the effort will pay dividends. Try to anticipate what a reporter might need and be ready with as much background material as possible. Maps, graphs, and charts are great.

Take the time to explain city issues to reporters, *really* explain. Many topics, particularly budget matters, are Greek to most people. It's the job of reporters to put those issues in English. They can't do it if they don't understand the material to begin with. Particularly at budget time, you might want to consider a news briefing. Invite reporters to an informal "sit-down" chat to cover the budget in the detail they need. This strategy also works well, for example, if the city is embroiled in a complicated legal battle and you've decided it's best to simply walk reporters through the story from start to finish.



---

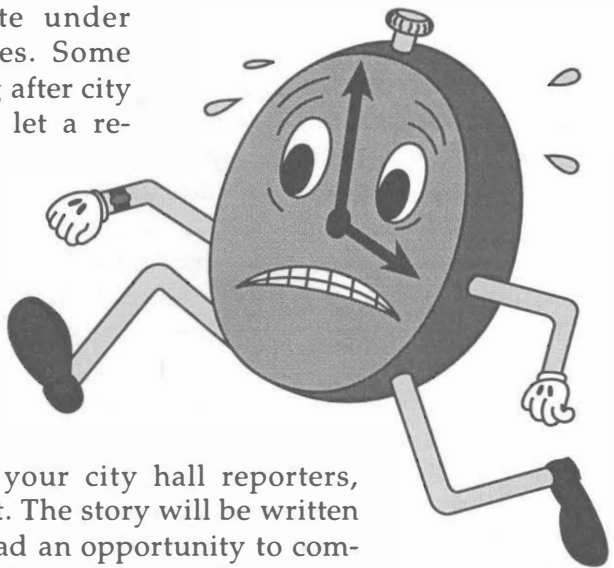
---

Reporters who regularly cover city hall and regularly attend council meetings should receive an advance agenda packet identical to the ones distributed to councilmembers and city staff. The more accurate information a reporter has, the less chance of error.

### The ticking clock

Reporters operate under constant deadlines. Some deadlines are long after city hall is closed, so let a reporter know where you can be reached after hours or on weekends. You may think this is an inconvenience, but if you're a primary source for your city hall reporters,

you've got to do it. The story will be written whether you've had an opportunity to comment or not. So, it's in the city's best interest, and yours, to be available. Return reporters' phone calls promptly.



An effective communicator knows the ins and outs of the media. That includes knowledge of deadlines and reporters' schedules. If your city issues press releases, do so with those deadlines in mind. Also,



---

---

if an important story breaks in city hall, let reporters know in time to prepare a thorough story. Don't ask a media outlet to stretch a deadline for you — the production side of the news business takes time.

Because reporters, and most of the rest of us, have many demands on our time, avoid holding a press conference unless the announcement merits it. Few topics do. Reporters will resent a news conference presenting information they could have gotten over the phone. But they appreciate an opportunity to ask questions and get tape and footage on a notable event. Remember what makes news. Again, an informal news *briefing* might be a better approach.

### **The nature of the beast**

Print reporters and broadcast reporters are two different animals, with different deadlines, different approaches, and different needs.

Newspapers *are* “the press” and need more details to flesh out their stories. Be sure their reporters get the details they need. The larger the newspaper, the more “desks” — the city desk, the state and national desks, features, financial and business, sports. Your city's efforts to recruit new industry or hike its bond rating might interest business and financial editors even more than the city editor.

Sure, newspapers need good photos, but it's television that *thrives* on the visual. Which is better:

1. an interview with the city manager standing in front of city hall answering questions about



- 
- the new playground equipment in the city park, or
2. an interview with the city manager standing in front of the playground equipment in the park, answering questions while children romp and crawl behind her?

Which story makes taxpayers more enthusiastic about the investment?

Think visual and offer to give television reporters that little extra time to make the story better. They need the extra time to set the scene more than they need details. Give television reporters concise information that's clear and factual. Think in terms of sound bites and give them compact statements highlighting what you think taxpayers need to know.

Radio reporters need the same thing when it comes to information and sound bites, and they usually need it quickly. Most radio stations provide news on the hour and probably half hour, too, especially during drive-time. So they don't have much time to wade through the 100-page budget document to write a 45-second story. Help them out.

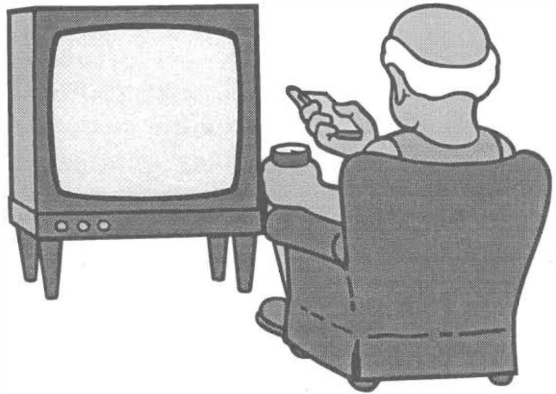
### **The cable opportunity**

The federal laws regulating cable television are complicated, but if your community has cable service, your city might have a right to a PEG channel (public/educational/governmental). It does if it's written into your franchise with the company. Cities with PEG channels use them to broadcast council meetings and other gatherings and to offer live call-in talk shows, discussion programs, documentaries, features on city services, and instructional programming.



---

Even without a city-controlled PEG channel, many cable companies still offer local programming and are anxious for story ideas and guests to interview.



Nearly all cable companies feature a channel best described as a “video bulletin board.” A piece of equipment called a character generator has a keyboard used to produce printed messages on the screen. This channel offers an ideal outlet to reach citizens with basic information such as meeting schedules, parks and recreation activities, street closings, holiday garbage pick-up schedules, and much more.

Don’t underestimate the audience for these cable channels.





# 4

## The successful interview

---



Your goal isn't to *survive* media interviews; it's to *succeed* at media interviews. Most folks in city hall look upon an interview with a reporter as something to "get through" without too much damage. That's the wrong attitude.

Most journalists who interview you today will be graduates of journalism school and perhaps even have a master's in communications. They have years of training and experience in interviewing techniques. That leaves most city officials at a disadvantage, unless you've taken the time to acquire some skills at *being* interviewed. There are do's and don'ts and tips to help you — and your city — get the most from your media opportunities.

Few reporters are municipal experts. They need your explanations to get their stories right. Never assume that a reporter knows what you're talking about, particularly a young reporter who's new on the beat and may be embarrassed to admit ignorance. The old adage is true: There's no such thing as a stupid question. Good reporters may blurt out the occasional uninformed inquiry, but at least they're trying to get the information in a format they can understand. Whatever you do, don't throw the question back in the reporter's face. If a reporter interviewing you asks very few questions, that should be your warning flag — the reporter may not understand and, therefore, can't follow up with appropriate inquiries. You have a responsibility in the interview to communicate well the information your citizens need.





There's nothing that will endear you more to a reporter than the words, "I don't know the answer to that question. But I'll find out and get right back to you." Reporters don't expect you to know every detail in city hall, but they do expect your help gathering the information. If you're not sure of a response, give yourself the courtesy of time. Nothing in the rules of this game requires you to give *immediate* answers, just prompt ones.

Avoid the temptation to speculate — no one will remember if you're right and no one will forget if you're wrong.

It's always a good idea to ask a reporter what topics will be covered in an interview, even when he or she calls ahead of time and makes an appointment. Then you can be better prepared and have background documents available. Don't let the reporter steer off those topics unless you're comfortable.

Practice makes perfect and, while you may feel a little silly at first, practice making your primary points while standing in front of a mirror. Watch your facial expressions and your hand gestures. Rehearse delivering those primary points succinctly, using short words and phrases that are easily understood. Avoid the governmental tendency to use bureaucratic language, technical jargon, and acronyms. Choose your words to express, not impress.



In other words, don't ramble on. If you launch into a detailed, 15-minute explanation, you're

---

---

making it difficult for the reporter to pull quotations of an acceptable length. It's particularly hard on broadcast reporters trying to select a 10-second "actuality" to play on the air. Your words are sure to be featured out of context and it won't be the reporter's fault. When you think about it, any one- or two-sentence quotation representing an entire conversation *will* be out of context. That's just the nature of journalism. So, on a silver platter, offer reporters a few concise sound bites that make your key points and make them quickly.

Repeat your key points often throughout the interview. Then, when the reporter flips through the notes or plays back the tape, he or she will be hit over and over again by the same message. It could strongly affect the story's focus.

Something else that can affect the story's focus is when you let a reporter put words in your mouth. It's very easy to do and can be disastrous. Just take a look at the scenario below:

You say: "I think what happened at last night's meeting was a simple difference of opinion between the mayor and the budget director. They have just agreed to disagree on this subject."

The reporter says: "So, in your opinion, the fight is over?"

You say: "I hope so."

The teaser for the evening newscast is: "Anytown councilmember hopes the fight between the mayor and budget director is over. Is it? Film at 11."



---

---

You never said anything about “a fight,” the reporter did. But look what happened. If a reporter asks you a question using language you’re uncomfortable with, rephrase the question in your own words, then respond.

Remember, when you’re being interviewed, you’re a spokesperson for your city. You’d be surprised how many officials begin an answer to a reporter’s question with: “Well, personally, I think ...”

Finally, forget “no comment” as a response. You’ll look guilty of something, even if you haven’t done anything! Simply tell the reporter you don’t know the answer or you aren’t comfortable discussing a subject. If litigation precludes you from comment, say so. Be candid. And if you’re worried about being misquoted, say so. Good reporters want to develop the trust of good sources and will work with you until you feel more at ease.



### **The interview for print**

When talking to a newspaper reporter, there are some specific things you can do to make life easier. Arm yourself with facts and figures. Even offer copies of graphs and tables if

you’ve got them. Remember, stories for newspapers are much longer than for broadcast, and print reporters need more information, more detail.



---

---

Speak slowly if a reporter is taking notes by hand. Talking much faster than the hand can write will increase the chances that you will be misquoted. Repeat yourself.

Restrict the time you allow for an interview. It will keep the reporter's questions on target and keep you both from straying away from the topic.

### **The interview for television**

Keep your message simple for both television and radio, but for television, there are more guidelines to bear in mind.

1. Look at the reporter or interviewer. If you're in a studio, forget about the monitors. Stay focused!
2. Be animated, using gestures and expressions. It will keep the viewer from reaching for the remote control.
3. Don't fidget.
4. Use a conversational tone and, no matter what, remain calm.
5. Relax, but don't slump if you're sitting down. Stay comfortably upright and alert.
6. Give short answers but avoid simply answering a question with "yes" or "no." You'll look uncooperative.
7. If the reporter or interviewer veers off course, don't hesitate to steer the interview back to subjects you're comfortable addressing.
8. Dress appropriately. Try not to wear white (it glares) and avoid loud patterns or large prints. Ask the interviewer if your glasses are a problem. Avoid distracting earrings or other jewelry that's too large or moves around.



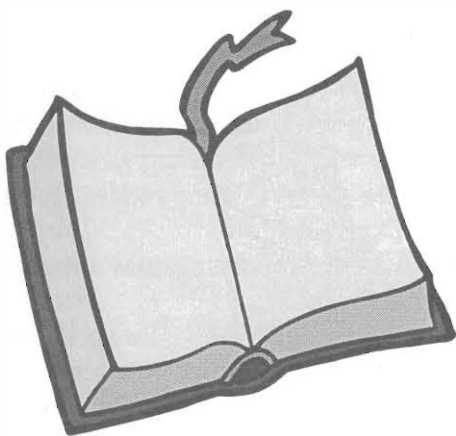
---

---

## Speaking their language: a glossary

To always be safe, the best thing to do is assume everything you say to a reporter could end up on the front page of tomorrow's paper — with big headlines. But if you've developed a relationship with a reporter who at some point may require your help behind the scenes, here are some terms you should understand:

- **off the record.** This information may not be broadcast or published. Period. You're treading on dangerous ground here. Also, be sure the reporter agrees before you launch into a confidential conversation.
- **not for attribution.** If you tell a reporter something that's not for attribution, the reporter may use the information but not your name. Make sure you and the reporter are clear about how the information *will* be attributed. Is it OK for the reporter to say "a city hall source"?
- **background.** For most intents and purposes, it means the same thing as "not for attribution." The information is intended to help the reporter flesh out the story, but the source is a little queasy. Again, make sure you and the reporter understand how the information *will* be attributed.



- 
- deep background. This phrase hit it big after Watergate. Deep Throat was on deep background, which means he or she was off the record. Same thing. But remember how Woodward and Bernstein used information from Deep Throat to get at other information? And remember how Deep Throat was used to confirm information from other sources?

The big tip here is to be sure that you and the reporter understand whether the information you give may be used and, if so, how.

One more tip: avoid cute ploys such as “just between you and me.” Such phrases don’t mean very much to a reporter and don’t give you much protection. “On the record” is the most important phrase you need to understand.



# 5

## One of "those" days

---

Even if you have a positive working relationship with the reporters who cover your city hall, things can still go wrong. In fact, you can count on it! Suggestions for "those" days include:

1. stay calm,
2. stay calm, and
3. stay calm.

### Some reporters just aren't nice

While crooked mayors and inept city managers are unusual, they do exist. So do bad reporters, although they're unusual, too. Think about how many working journalists there are in this country, yet most information you see and hear is reliable.

But if your city hall has a lemon on the beat, don't give up hope. Antagonistic reporters can get the upper hand if you let them. Here are some do's and don'ts that should help.

1. **Don't** assume you have no control over the interview. With a little forethought, you can avoid being at the reporter's mercy.
2. **Do** remember you often can confuse an antagonistic reporter with a simple "yes" or "no" answer. These answers are death to a television interview, but also leave print reporters with no quote. Silence is golden to you, but flusters a reporter. Don't feel like you have to jump in and fill that empty space.





- 
3. **Don't** answer a needling question. Repeat it in your own, presumably softer, language.
  4. **Don't** answer a question you don't fully understand. Ask for a repeat or clarification.
  5. **Don't** try to answer a hypothetical "what if ..." question.
  6. **Don't** respond too quickly to multiple questions. The temptation to answer the last query you hear can be fatal.
  7. **Don't** answer argumentative questions from the reporter. Once a reporter "gets you going," he or she is in control of the interview, not you.
  8. **Don't** let the "60 Minutes" approach fluster you. If a reporter shows up unannounced with no appointment and requests an interview, while it may be frustrating, it's best to comply if you can. But that doesn't mean you must usher the reporter right in. Ask what the interview will be about and then offer the reporter a chair. Go back to your office, shut the door, and gather your thoughts. Pull the files you need to refresh your memory and then review with yourself the important points you want your citizens to understand about the topic. Even take a few minutes to practice delivering those points clearly and concisely. Then invite the reporter through your office door.

### When a reporter gets it wrong

When reporters make mistakes, tell them **so**. Call the reporter directly, and politely explain the error in the most recent edition or broadcast. Give the reporter a chance to correct the mistake in the paper or on the air before heading up the ladder.





In the case of a newspaper, the news editor or city editor is the next step, then the editor, then the publisher. If all else fails, request space for a rebuttal column or write a letter to the editor. If radio or television makes the mistake, your next step after the reporter is the news director, then the general manager, who oversees station operations. A formal complaint to the FCC is a possibility for the unforgivable transgression.

Although suing a local media outlet for libel or slander may make a big splash when the suit is filed, public figures rarely come out on top and the expense — not to mention the headache — will probably outweigh any long-term satisfaction. The action will also drive a wedge between city hall and the media and make reaching your citizens more difficult in the future. You can't win a war with the media, just like you can't win a war with a citizen.

No reputable news outlet will refuse to correct a mistake you can prove. Have your ducks in a row before you call a reporter about a possible error. Errors in fact usually can be worked out and corrected. It's those quotation errors that present problems, particularly for the print media. If the conversation wasn't taped, it's your word against the reporter's. Quite frankly, reporters are accused all the time of making errors when, in fact, an official just didn't realize how a quote was going to look in print. It's one thing to say it and another to read it on Page 1! Be sure you were misquoted before you claim to be.



---

---

**Don't bother me now.  
I'm having a crisis!**

There's one rule of thumb when dealing with the media during a crisis — and it's not an easy rule to follow: Tell it all and tell it fast. Your instincts tell you to withdraw, keep what information you have close to the vest, and try to avoid reporters as long as possible. That strategy will only cause trouble. During any kind of crisis in your community, reporters are under the gun, too. They need information and they're facing deadlines. Give them hard, solid information as soon as you have it.

In times of crisis:

1. Keep discussions with reporters brief and to the point. Don't speculate.
2. Don't appear to be avoiding a question that reporters know you're equipped to answer. It will look suspicious.
3. Avoid saying "no comment" even though the stress of the moment may make that response look particularly appealing.
4. Be courteous, despite the pressures.
5. Don't be cute or off-the-cuff, even in an attempt to cut the tension.

Of course, there are different kinds of crises. A political crisis — reporters have discovered the city finance director with his hand in the till — requires prompt response and open, honest answers to inquiries.



---

---

If potential litigation or the possibility of personnel reprimand makes you leery of answering certain questions, say so. But you can't refuse to talk to reporters.

A crisis involving a natural disaster or emergency is something else again. Public safety may be at stake and local government is usually the first to respond. City hall may be the first place reporters come for information. Does your community have a crisis management plan and does it include a section on information dissemination and handling the media?

Here are some "musts" for your community's disaster/emergency communications plan:

1. One person should be the spokesperson for your city. This centralizes communications and avoids the problem of disseminating conflicting information.
2. Release only verified facts.
3. Don't place blame unless there's no doubt, despite media pressures.
4. Forbid "no comment" as a response.
5. Don't go off the record.

Don't wait until there's a crisis in your community to realize that you never drafted your city's crisis communications plan. It's a good idea to include media representatives in the planning process, too, to ensure the plan will cover their needs. It also will make them more aware of the pressures a city faces during a disaster.



# 6

## Let the sun shine!

---



Tennessee's open meetings law, better known as the Sunshine Law, means that reporters and the public have a right to attend city meetings — even some meetings you may think they shouldn't attend. Tennessee's Sunshine Law is one of the most comprehensive in the country and your city is safe if you simply open all meetings all the time.

*Tennessee Code Annotated 8-44-101--106* says that "all meetings of any governing body are declared to be public meetings open to the public at all times, except as provided in the Tennessee Constitution." The reference to the state constitution affects only the legislature and is of no concern to local officials.

There's also an open records law in Tennessee (*T.C.A. 10-7-503*) with very few exceptions, although there are a few.

MTAS published a *Technical Bulletin* specifically about Tennessee's Sunshine Law and open records requirements. It explains court cases that have impacted the laws and spells out the few allowable exceptions. Call the MTAS library at (615) 974-0411 for a copy.





*Printed on recycled paper.*