

# Adversaries Always

Legislators and reporters see their own as ethical. But neither profession thinks too highly of the morals of the other.

By Nicole Casal Moore

## Why didn't the legislature pass the budget on time?"

1. Because democracy is a messy process. We all hold our values dearly and want what's best for our constituents."
2. Because we spent too much time bickering and being stubborn instead of coming to a consensus."

Which is the honest answer? Either, depending on who you are.

In a room of 50 reporters, all but a few preferred the second response. The one about bickering was the "real" answer, they said.

But when the audience was 25 legislative staffers this winter, their choice was clear: Democracy is messy.

Surprised? Probably not.

It's no secret that legislators and their staff don't see the world through the same lens reporters do. A recent NCSL survey quantifies some gut feelings about the essential, but not always easy interactions between reporters and state legislators.

"It's a parasitic relationship," says Pennsylvania Representative Frank LaGrotta, a former sports reporter for USA Today. "Each person in the relationship has a need that the other person can fill. For the reporter, the need is information. And for the legisla-

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REPRESENTATIVE  
**FRANK LAGROTTA**  
PENNSYLVANIA

tor, the need is free publicity. ... We each have a job to do."

Conducted last summer, NCSL's online survey asked reporters and legislators to rate the truth of statements about themselves and members of the other profession on a five-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." One hundred journalists and 60 legislators responded. Though the poll was not scientific, it might be the first to measure this complex interplay.

Results show that members of both professions question the others' ethics. Reporters question legislators' honesty and understanding of how the media operates. And legislators question reporters' coverage choices and objectivity.

## WHO'S MORE ETHICAL?

Both legislators and reporters see their own as generally ethical. But neither profession has overwhelming confidence in the morals of the other. A full 78 percent of both legislators and reporters agree or strongly agree that their profession is ethical. But only 54 percent of legislators say reporters are ethical, and 57 percent of reporters say the same about legislators.

Texas Senator Jeff Wentworth says these



SENATOR  
**JEFF WENTWORTH**  
TEXAS

numbers show nothing more than natural wariness. "Human nature is perverse," he says. "We can be suspicious and cynical in our view of professions that are in close proximity to our own."

These numbers may also be a function of fundamental differences in how each occupation sees the English language. "Ethical" reporters pass up freebies from the people they cover. In many states "ethical" legislators can accept gifts as long as they disclose the sources.

"If you're going to be serving for altruistic purposes, do you need someone to give you a ticket to the ball game to do your job?" asks Bob Priddy, news director of the MissouriNet, a statewide radio network that reaches about 65 stations. Priddy says members of the public raise an eyebrow when they see legislators receive special treatment, even though lawmakers often say they can't be bought. Legislators should avoid even the appearance of a quid pro quo, reporters say.

In many places, though, gifts are part of the local culture, and legislators say they want to avoid the appearance of being rude. "When you're an elected official people want to give you things that are generally of inconsequential value," Wentworth says. "Often, we're in an awkward position. Especially in the South, you don't want to be ungracious about it."

In Texas, legislators have to report gifts worth more than \$50, and they can accept as many T-shirts, coffee mugs, baseball caps and paper weights as they please without listing

## REPORTERS' TIPS FOR LEGISLATORS

- ✓ Be honest.
- ✓ Make sure you and the reporter understand each other's definitions of "off the record" before you agree to it.
- ✓ Speak knowledgeably about an issue or don't speak at all.
- ✓ Don't be afraid to defer questions to other legislators who know more about a particular issue.
- ✓ Give straight answers.
- ✓ Speak plain English.
- ✓ Make sure you understand the questions.
- ✓ Make sure reporters understand your answers.
- ✓ Prepare for interviews.
- ✓ Avoid saying "no comment." That translates to "I did it."
- ✓ Speak for yourself, not through spokespeople.

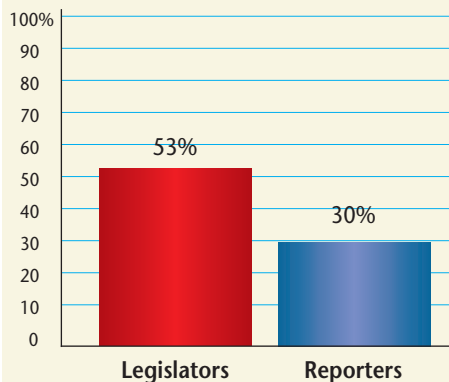
## LEGISLATORS' TIPS FOR REPORTERS

- ✓ Be honest.
- ✓ Correct your mistakes.
- ✓ Do your research: Study the subject you're writing about and know its history.
- ✓ Treat everyone with consideration for their feelings.
- ✓ Treat everyone with respect.
- ✓ Get context.
- ✓ Admit if you don't understand something.
- ✓ Don't ask hypothetical questions.
- ✓ Make sure the archived stories in your outlet's library are accurate.
- ✓ Double check facts.
- ✓ Respect legislators' time frames. (They may be on the floor debating a bill when you need to talk to them.)
- ✓ Trust that sometimes staff members can speak for elected officials.
- ✓ Read the bills.

These are tips legislators and reporters gave each other at sessions where NCSL presented the findings of this survey. For full survey results and more tips, go to [www.ncsl.org/programs/press/2004/media\\_legislator\\_home.htm](http://www.ncsl.org/programs/press/2004/media_legislator_home.htm).

## DO LEGISLATORS KNOW WHAT'S NEWS?

Percentage who agree with the statement, "Legislators generally understand what qualifies as a news story."



them on disclosure forms. Wentworth has 40 caps on display and another 35 on their way to the hospital for chemotherapy patients.

## ARE LEGISLATORS HONEST?

Eighty-three percent of lawmakers who took the NCSL survey agree or strongly agree that their colleagues generally answer reporters' questions honestly. But fewer than half of reporters agree.

Gene Gibbons, executive editor of *StateLine.org*, gave insight into what "truth" means to each profession. "There's a fundamental conflict there," Gibbons says. "Legislators often want to put the best face on information, and that's not what the reporters are looking for. Reporters are looking for straightforward, unvarnished facts."

He gave an example: If a redevelopment project was about to force residents to move, reporters would want to give the facts and "let the chips fall where they may." But legislators might want to cushion the announcement of the project for the people it might displace.

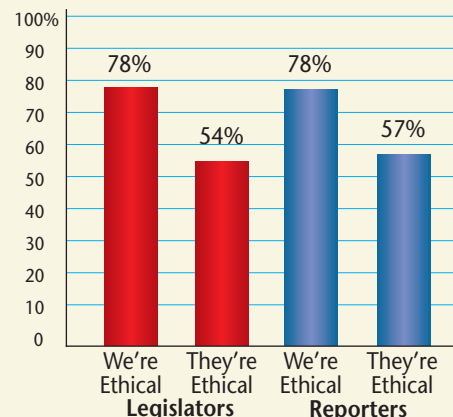
There's a reason for that, says South Carolina Senator Jim Ritchie. It's about working



SENATOR  
**JIM RITCHIE**  
SOUTH CAROLINA

## ARE WE ETHICAL? ARE THEY?

Percentage who agree members of their profession are ethical compared with members of the other profession.



within the system. "Legislators are trying to defeat or pass a piece of legislation, generally. And when legislators speak about a position on an issue, it is an honest view of the legislation within the context that they're trying to work. ...The reporter is looking only at the outcome. It's just a different perspective."

## WHO KNOWS NEWS?

What is news? Although 53 percent of legislators say they know, only 30 percent of reporters validate that view. Answers to another survey question suggest what's behind this split. The poll asked reporters to rank six possible sources of story ideas. It asked legislators to rank where they think reporters find stories. "Conversation and introspection," the No. 1 place reporters turn for inspiration, was No. 3 on legislators' lists. "Press releases and press conferences," a low No. 4 for reporters, was No. 2 for state lawmakers.

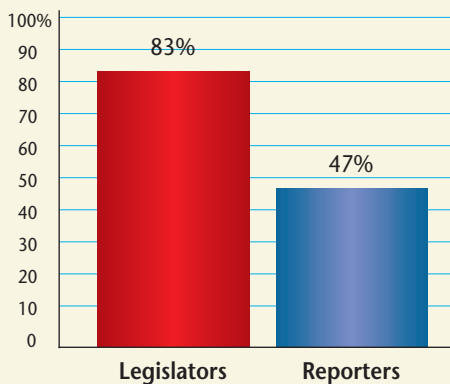
"We think. We reason. We analyze," says Bill Simmons, political editor of the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*. "We look for elements of the story that are worthy of greater exploration. We learn from other people around us."

In other words, a lot of story ideas aren't presented to journalists as story ideas. And a lot of press releases don't make it into the paper.

Some legislators understand the formula for front page news, but don't agree with its logic. Only 29 percent of legislators say the media in their state adequately gives citizens

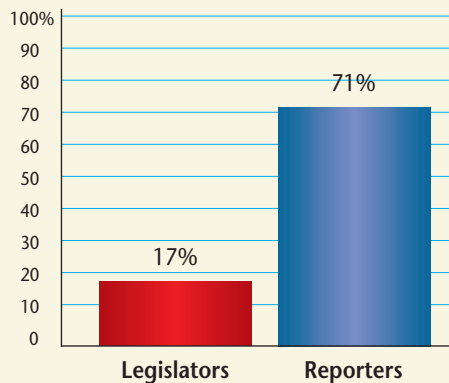
### ARE LEGISLATORS GENERALLY HONEST?

Percentage who agree, "Generally, legislators are honest when responding to media inquiries.:"



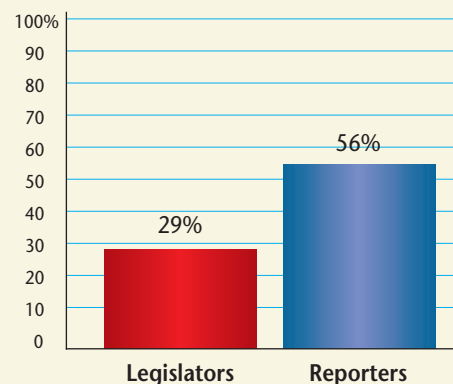
### HOW OBJECTIVE ARE THE MEDIA?

Percentage who agree, "Most news segments are neutral, unbiased accounts."



### DO THE MEDIA ADEQUATELY INFORM?

Percentage who agree, "Generally, the media in my state adequately provides citizens with the information they need to know about policy decisions in the state legislature."



the information they need to know about legislative policy decisions. Legislators say the pursuit of conflict means a lot of their good work goes ignored.

"They look too much for controversy. It's all these people screaming at each other," says Representative LaGrotta, of Pennsylvania. "I think the media are no longer doing a service, they're selling a product."

Lucy Morgan, capitol bureau chief of the St. Petersburg Times, says her newsroom doesn't operate that way. "Our basic mission is to inform our readers about what government is doing, so they know how to vote when they get to the polls in November. And so we try to look at each story in light of how this is going to affect the lives and the pocketbooks of the people who read our paper," Morgan said. Sometimes, she added, that is not flattering to legislators or their policies.

Reporters know that not everything worthy of ink or airtime gets enough attention. Only 56 percent of journalists agree that the media adequately covers the state capitol. They blame a lack of time and resources. Simmons, of the Arkansas Democrat Gazette, considers himself lucky. "Among newspapers, some do better than others," he says. "The one I work for does better than most because it maintains a sizable news hole and expects aggressive coverage."

Simmons is in the minority. American Journalism Review tracks state government news coverage. The magazine's latest study shows that news holes and capitol bureaus across the country are shrinking.

### BIAS: WHO'S TO BLAME?

A question about media bias reflected the widest gap in NCSL's survey responses. When asked to rate the truth of the statement, "Most news segments are neutral, unbiased accounts," 71 percent of reporters agree or strongly agree, while only 17 percent of legislators do.

Bias is a broad accusation, often preceded by adjectives like "liberal," "negative," and "sensational." And Maine Senator John



SENATOR  
**JOHN MARTIN**  
MAINE

Martin detects an "easy" slant.

"There is a criticism of the press that they will do the story that takes less work to write about," Martin says. "It's easy to say water's being polluted, but it's another story to spend a lot of time talking about what causes it. ... I think that very often, legislators complain about the depth of the story."

Senator Ritchie, of South Carolina, agrees. "Legislators get frustrated because oftentimes the merit of the initiative is lost beneath the personality conflicts that the press more readily reports," he says.

Gibbons, of Stateline, blames public officials to a certain extent. "Legislators themselves, in the way they campaign, drive some of it," Gibbons says. "They tend to disparage

their opponents and depict the other party as almost an evil institution sometimes, rather than taking the more positive approach, which is that both parties are trying to solve problems with different approaches."

### RESPECT AND UNDERSTANDING

Not all the survey results show disagreement. Most responders from both professions say legislators return calls on time. And a fair number of legislators and reporters feel that the other occupation has an understanding of and respect for their line of work. Half of reporters said legislators understand and respect what they do, and 39 percent of legislators said reporters share that sentiment.

For the other half of reporters, and two-thirds of legislators, both sectors have some advice. Reporters to legislators: Let your guard down; make your press releases more like news stories; take the time to explain the nuts and bolts of complex issues to reporters. Legislators to reporters: take your role as public informers seriously; don't write the story then call for the quote from the other side; stay at your jobs longer.

No one is knocking good rapport. But Simmons, of the Arkansas Democrat Gazette, stresses that reporters can't sacrifice good stories for good relationships with sources. "Reporters who do their job will always find relationships with public officials strained from time to time by their faithfulness to their journalistic duty."

Gibbons, of Stateline.org, also sees value in the tension. "Reporters and legislators are adversaries," he says. "And they should be." ■