

Chapter XIII

Media Coverage of the Legislature

California's importance as a news center has been reflected in the extraordinary attention paid to the activities of the state government, the Legislature and the Governor by the additional newspaper, television, radio and magazine coverage over the past several years.

As the number one state in the nation, not only are the number of reporters from California news media increasing at the Capitol, but more coverage is being given by the national press, television, radio and magazines.

Press associations and wire services, along with the major daily newspapers, maintain bureaus or full-time correspondents at Sacramento to report what happens in and about the Capitol, as well as to relate the activities of the numerous agencies of the state which touch every man's, woman's, and child's life in this rapidly expanding state.

Worldwide news-gathering and distributing agencies long have maintained permanent bureaus at the Capitol. The Associated Press services virtually every daily newspaper and broadcast station in California. In addition, the press corps includes news services which specialize in coverage for various large and small California newspapers, radio and television stations.

At the 1943 session, the accredited correspondents formed the Capitol Correspondents Association and, by action of the Senate and Assembly, officially assumed the task of authenticating credentials of all press representatives. A standing committee of the association examines applications for press privileges. The Joint Rules limit full accreditation to those who qualify under the rules, which set forth certain necessary qualifications.¹ Seats and desks in the Senate and Assembly Chambers are allotted only to regular Capitol correspondents of authorized news media.² Special press cards for correspondents covering legislative proceedings for a limited period are issued upon proper screening by the standing committee, just as are the press cards for those regularly in attendance at sessions.

Accurate coverage of the Capitol news requires a thorough understanding of governmental functions and a knowledge of public affairs. Many of the press corps members are veterans in the service and have a wide acquaintance with state officials and civil service employees.

News events must be handled speedily and clearly. Press conferences, board and commission meetings, departmental reports, and interviews are a part of the daily routine for those whose beat is the Capitol and the various governmental agencies. Dozens of buildings, both surrounding the Capitol and elsewhere in the Sacramento area, contain state offices and are sites of public hearings and other newsworthy events. The reporters must cover all of them at some time or other.

¹ Joint Rule 32.

² Joint Rule 32, Senate Rule 13.

The main Capitol “beat” includes the Governor’s office, Secretary of State’s office, other constitutional officers, Department of Finance, Legislative Analyst, and legislators. Such key news sources as the Fair Political Practices Commission, the various major state departments, such as Motor Vehicles, Transportation, Corrections and Rehabilitation, Education, Third District Court of Appeal, and other divisions of government must be covered at various times.

Nearly all state agencies now maintain extensive web sites, which are used extensively by correspondents for both daily news coverage and research.

During regular sessions of the Legislature and the occasional special sessions, the job of covering the news becomes more complex. The chief activity, of course, centers on the Senate and the Assembly, the Governor’s office, the Legislative Analyst, and other agencies allied closely with legislation.

Press conferences are occasionally held by the Governor. Important developments in the Legislature or in the state usually cause special press conferences. A room, especially equipped for newspaper, radio and television, is available for press conferences of the Governor, Members of the Legislature, and newsworthy visitors. Many correspondents and photographers also cover state and national campaigns for their newspapers or stations, and travel throughout the state or nation with major candidates during election years.

From the day a bill is introduced until it is finally disposed of by either the Legislature or the Governor, the correspondents and photographers for the press associations and services, newspapers, and broadcast media must cover its daily progress because it is of interest to some locality, newspaper, radio or television station. Somebody somewhere is affected by every bill or measure that is introduced in the Legislature.

Though the words were written some time ago, the aims of the Capitol Correspondents Association are, perhaps, best described by a former, longtime Capitol reporter:

“The press of California . . . is intent upon reporting the business of the Legislature, and the work of its individual members, with the greatest possible degree of thoroughness, accuracy, speed, and fairness. Representing that press, the members of the Capitol Correspondents Association, like the Members of the Legislature, have one primary goal—better service to the districts of the State from which they individually come, and better service to the California public generally.”³

Televising the Legislature

To bring state government closer to the citizens of California, the legislature has initiated a television production project in each house. Live, unedited,

³ Phillips, Herbert, “The Press and the Legislature,” *Legislator’s Orientation Conference*, 1961, p. 48.

gavel-to-gavel coverage of Assembly floor sessions and committees began in February 1991, and within a year the Senate had also televised their proceedings.

The television signals are made available to any bona fide news or educational organization, and allow Californians to view and participate in the legislative process. The California Channel is a nonprofit cable network which transmits via satellite the unedited footage to cable operators throughout the state. Currently, over 4.8 million cable subscribers can view the proceedings of the Legislature from the convenience of their homes, schools, or offices.

Each house of the Legislature has oversight over its own television production operations. The Assembly Rules Committee coordinates the television coverage of the lower house, while the Senate Rules Committee oversees its television operations. Control rooms are stationed in the Capitol Annex, where technicians coordinate the television production, utilizing the remotely controlled cameras that have been installed in each chamber.



View of the State Capitol from the east.
Note the semi circular apse and the terraced grounds.