

## **Views of the Press and Media Strategies of Missouri State Legislators**

Rep. Paul Wieland, R-Imperial, remembers a friendly piece of advice an older politician once gave him.

“He said: ‘Get your name in the paper and in the press as much as you can — all press is good press. Until the last 30 days before an election, then you want it all to be good.’”

When Wieland, who was elected in 1994 to a term in the Missouri House and was again elected in 2010, got the advice some 20 years ago, he laughed and said: “Well, I don’t think that’s really right.”

“But the longer I’ve seen it, I’ve seen people that have been able to get their names in the media for some ridiculous things, and sure enough you see them continue to go along in the careers... that name ID is very important,” Wieland said.

While name recognition is crucial to advancing any political career, and earned media is a heck of a lot cheaper than TV and radio commercials, Wieland said that when it comes to the nitty-gritty of getting legislation across the finish line in the General Assembly, media attention only goes so far. Wieland is running for the state Senate in his exurban St. Louis district, which stretches south away from the city.

“In order to pass a bill, you’ve got a lot of little things that need to happen, and (media attention) is one of the little things, but in itself I don’t think it can really make or break you,” he said. “I think it’s a factor... but it can’t make or break you.”

In eight interviews at the Capitol during the first half of the 2014 legislative session, lawmakers explained their views of the press and strategies of working

through journalists to advance legislative priorities. While the answers were mostly restrained as they chose their words carefully, lawmakers discussed how they approached their relationships with the press and focused first and foremost on the responsibility of the media to inform the public. There are 163 members in the Missouri House of Representatives.

A large body of media research explores the role the press plays in setting the public agenda. Media outlets such as newspapers and TV stations choose what to publish or what to air, and those choices influence how the public perceives certain events. The media, in other words, have a lot of power when it comes to setting the public agenda. Lawmakers and other elected leaders often are forced to respond to those coverage choices.

Much less research focuses on how politicians attempt to set the public agenda and advance their legislative priorities. Moreover, what strategies do they use to work through the press to advance those priorities? Lawmakers constantly attempt to “set the agenda,” whether it’s the legislative agenda or the media agenda, and by introducing legislation, pushing messages out on social media or contacting members of the press with potential story tips, they are working to advance their goals.

Lawmakers suggested a significant role of the Capitol press corps, emphasizing the role of communicating the workings of the Legislature to the general public, but they also questioned whether its work was as good as it could and should be. But even their criticisms of the press were an attempt to set the

media's agenda. By focusing on their criticisms of the media, lawmakers can more easily dismiss the media's larger role in the Legislature.

They lobbed criticisms that the media focus on controversy and give some stories a disproportionate sense of importance. The lawmakers that were most dismissive of the Capitol press corps were most likely to eschew it altogether and push messages directly to their constituents through blogs, social media and by sending legislative columns to local media outlets. At one point during their interviews, however, all of the lawmakers acknowledged the challenges of covering the Capitol with limited resources and time.

Democrats were more likely to invoke the democratic role of the press in society, saying the media at their best serve as a "fourth estate" and work as a check on elected officials. Republicans were more likely to say they don't rely on the press to communicate messages to their constituents and instead focus on directly reaching the people they represent by phone, email or in person.

Ultimately, the legislators — representing both parties as well as urban and rural parts of the state — differed widely in how they reach out to journalists for attention, in the ways they use social media and in the extent of their criticism of the media.

### **Consensus on at least one thing**

All of the lawmakers interviewed made a point of saying they always return calls from members of the media — at least once. They also said the press could do a better job and should stop focusing so much on the hottest and most controversial issues.

“I think they look at the issues that are going to draw the most readers, not necessarily the ones that are going to have the most impact, and that’s how you sell newspapers,” Rep. David Wood, R-Versailles, said. Wood represents a rural district with more than a half dozen small, local papers in his district. He maintains he is not interested in other elected positions and focuses most of his legislative attention on education issues.

Lawmakers believe that in the focus on controversial items (examples mentioned included gun-law nullification and abortion bills) and the drive to boost or at least staunch the decline of readers and viewers, the process-driven stories of a multi-billion dollar budget and mundane lawmaking often get lost. Of course, the media has long struggled with the tension between providing their readers stories that will get the most reads (or clicks) and the stories of the most substance. And politicians and legislators of all stripes have long criticized the media, which makes for an easy dismissal of particular stories when they are less than flattering. Even the critiques can be a strategic attempt to advance priorities.

“So because the public doesn’t always understand the process, when you guys or the media reports certain things, they think we really worked and spent a lot of time on it,” Wood said, adding that this is true even regarding bills that won’t even receive a hearing, let alone make it to the governor’s desk.

While they did not agree on the reasons or the extent of their shortcomings, most of the lawmakers said the media fall short of the media’s own stated aspirations. Rep. John Wright, D-Rocheport, gave the press a score of six on a 10-

point scale. Wieland gave it a C. Rep. Karla May, D-St. Louis, said the press is “meek” and “timid.”

Wright said he thinks the press focuses on stories with narrative appeal, but “a lot of times the real important public policy is buried in the numbers or in the footnotes.” He cited a committee hearing where a more than \$200 million proposal for education funding was approved, but the majority of articles on the hearing focused on an \$8 line-item for tinfoil hats — to keep the black helicopters away.

Rep. Sue Allen, R-Town & Country, was more critical of the press, especially the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, which she said has a liberal bias in its editorials and the way its news stories are written. Allen represents a suburban St. Louis district and serves as an appropriations chair, helping piece together the state’s mental health budget. Of all the lawmakers, her criticisms were the harshest and her online presence was the strongest by way of actively pushing her own accounts of events that are widely covered in the press.

“As far as complete and accurate and unbiased, it doesn’t happen,” she said plainly.

### **Differences among lawmakers**

Three major differences among the representatives emerged during the interviews: how specifically they target certain journalists with messages, their use of social media to bypass traditional news media filters and the extent and nature of their press criticisms.

Some of the legislators said they have developed relationships with members of the press and strategically target certain journalists with potential stories they

know would be of particular interest to those reporters. Other lawmakers approach the press as more of a single entity and send out releases to any and all on their lists.

Rep. Jeremy LaFaver, D-Kansas City, for example, said he tries to find out the issues that journalists are most interested in and tailor messages for those journalists. “The thing that is important is understanding what journalists — I mean they are like anyone else — they’ve got things they are more interested in than others.”

LaFaver said making a phone call to one journalist can be a far more effective tool than sending a press release to a dozen. Representing the most affluent parts of Kansas City, he focuses on communicating with the reporters from the Kansas City Star but mentioned relationships with reporters from other parts of the state.

“There are those that I have developed good personal relationships with,” he said. “So I try to engage with them frequently, and to be effective at it, you’ve got to be a reliable, timely and trustworthy source of information.

“And so that’s what I try to do for those folks, and then in return, from time to time, I pitch them a story I think is important for their viewers or readers to hear about, and occasionally they agree.”

LaFaver posts on a personal website articles published in traditional media outlets that relate to issues and legislation that are priorities to him. On that same web page, he also posts press releases from his office.

Not all of the lawmakers said they actively cultivate those types of relationships with journalists, and most said they are more likely to reach out to a larger swath of the press with a release than to make a personal phone call.

Moreover, LaFaver is one the minority party's most active speakers on the House floor, receiving more media coverage because he has more to say on the record.

One press release Wieland sent out in 2013 detailed a "roundtable discussion" business leaders from his district had at the Capitol with the speaker of the House. The release included a quote from Wieland and a list of the visitors. While the larger state outlets did not pick up the release, there was a short mention of the meeting in a small, local paper in his district. Another release provided details about visits a committee he chairs was making around the state.

The lawmakers generally agreed that a press release hardly ever means actual media attention, because the press is focusing on the topic not the release itself.

"Sometimes you target specific people; most of the time they target you," Wood said. "If it's a good idea and it draws some interest, normally the press finds you."

Most lawmakers also send out weekly Capitol Reports, which include updates of legislation the lawmaker supports, a summary of the week's events at the Capitol and a reiteration of where the lawmakers falls on any given issue. People register to have these reports sent to them, and the reports are usually focused more as a way for lawmakers to inform constituents directly about their legislative priorities, rather than a tool to garner media attention.

When it comes to social media such as Facebook and Twitter, some of the lawmakers aren't afraid to let it rip while others choose their words more carefully

but still enjoy non-traditional media outlets through which they can directly reach constituents and supporters.

Allen said she takes a “better safe than sorry” approach, especially with Twitter, although she does have her legislative assistant post to blogs and Facebook.

“I think there are many errors in messaging done through the social media, and once it’s out there, it’s not coming back,” she said. “So I would rather be controlled with the messages that go out, rather than just any message going out there. I kinda like less is better, keep it simple. K-I-S. But keep it accurate.”

While Twitter might require short bursts that will never come back, Facebook is a platform that allows politicians to engage with constituents and build networks of supporters.

“You can get direct feedback from Facebook as well,” Wood said. “When I post an article in the newspaper, if someone doesn’t pick up the phone and call or actually write me an email, I don’t even know that they’ve read it. But in Facebook you can ask a question and almost immediately you have either comments, likes, you know how many people saw it. It’s quick feedback.”

Wood doesn’t use Twitter, because “for me personally, I need to be concentrating on what I’m doing and not worrying about what I need to tweet out to somebody.”

Wright thinks social media platforms are too limiting for his thoughts and for complex and expansive issues.



“Twitter and Facebook I’m just starting to learn more about. I have sort of a natural reflex against sound-bite-form information, because I think problems are a little bit more complex and deserve a full story or something as opposed to a quip.”

As of April 15, Wright had only tweeted 15 times since his first tweet on May 18, 2012. When he does tweet, Wright sends out links to articles, pictures of visitors to the Capitol (such as Missouri football head coach Gary Pinkel) and notices of events he will be at or hearings on legislation he supports. Wright represents a mostly rural district in the middle of the state, which likely has far fewer Twitter users in it than the district that encompasses central Columbia or those near Kansas City and St. Louis. Wright has made expanding early childhood education a priority of his and has expressed a desire to advance to a statewide office or Senate seat before long.

On the other end of the spectrum, LaFaver is a prolific tweeter. He’s posted more than 2,000 tweets since creating a Twitter account in 2009, when he worked as a lobbyist rather than a lawmaker. He often expresses his thoughts on Twitter from the floor or during a committee hearing. Wieland said he vets his tweets with texts to a group of friends before he hits the publish button.

“In my spare time I am running for re-election (unopposed) like my friend Rep. Jay Barnes & many others you threatened...#washedup,” he recently tweeted at a conservative pundit from St. Louis. He also uses his Twitter account to pass along articles and to comment on the daily action in the Capitol.

The lawmakers' criticisms of the press ranged widely. Some criticized what they viewed as biased reporting, but Rep. Jeannie Riddle, R-Fulton, called the media an excellent "partner."

Allen and May offered the harshest criticisms. Allen said she thinks the press is often biased, especially her hometown paper, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. On the other hand, May said the press is timid in its reporting and afraid to go after the most important stories because they might lose access.

She pointed to recent coverage of the Medicaid expansion debate in Missouri as a prime example, arguing the media were not doing enough to explore the reasons behind Republican opposition to accepting federal money to expand health coverage to more Missourians.

"If I had a district of a thousand people, and half of those people wanted to expand Medicaid or 60 percent wanted to but I am voting not to, then who am I representing?" she said. "If I know it's going to close hospitals that are germane to the area in which I live... that type of story."

Allen, on the other hand, said she thinks the St. Louis Post-Dispatch has a liberal bias, in its editorial pages and in the news stories that it chooses and how it writes them. She also said she think its readers know what they are getting.

"The St. Louis Post-Dispatch is often very adept at leaving out key components of issues and putting a bias on what goes on (in the Capitol) versus what (appears) in print," Allen said. "... It's a more liberal bias, and I don't know why it exists. I know the Post readership goes down all the time."

She continued: "People know the Post, I believe. We only get it because my husband likes the sports page in the morning."

Allen uses a blog, which her legislative assistant posts on, to push her message of what occurs at the Capitol. One week in April, the blog had three posts, including one titled "House approves tax cut for Missouri families and businesses." The post's lead said the Missouri House had approved tax-cut legislation that "would reduce the tax burden for Missouri families and businesses." The second paragraph was a direct quote from Allen on the benefits of the legislation. Following paragraphs included details of the tax cut and more quotes from Allen.

Another post from that week referred and linked directly to a Post-Dispatch article on changes to Medicaid being considered by the Legislature, which would include restoring or adding coverage to some groups for some benefits. The post suggests a biased portrayal in the article: "Despite the verbiage used in the (Post-Dispatch) story, the Missouri House did not expand Medicaid. We included enhanced services for the existing Medicaid population using existing resources." The blog post goes on to say the article "gives a fair explanation of the reforms."

The article, written by Post-Dispatch Capitol reporter Virginia Young, says that "agreements are percolating on what might be called Medicaid Expansion Lite" and details a list of new services that were included in this year's budget such as dental health for Medicaid recipients and a bill that would cover pregnancy-related services for low-income mothers.

The Legislature has been debating whether to accept federal money to expand Medicaid eligibility. Thus far, Republicans have resisted the idea and have instead opted for reforms to the Medicaid system and the addition of some services.

Some lawmakers also will use the press to help associate their name with a particular issue or cause, even if that association will do little to influence legislative outcomes. For example, Wright, whose district encompasses portions of western Columbia and stretches to Rocheport, had an op-ed published in March in the Post-Dispatch. Titled “Our million-dollar Legislature,” the article railed against the practice of lobbyists providing sports tickets and free meals to lawmakers.

Wright wrote in the op-ed, “I become increasingly frustrated to know that influential groups are using steak dinners and sports tickets to try to divert our limited public resources toward private gain” and called for “a comprehensive new ethics law that places strict limitations on lobbyist gifts.” While Wright’s district is far from St. Louis and a single op-ed is unlikely to sway the complicated politics surrounding ethics reform legislation, the article helps establish an association between Wright and ethics reform. Wright has suggested in other interviews he might be interested in seeking statewide office one day, when an association with an issue like ethics reform could come in handy.

Riddle, who like Wieland has announced a run for Senate this fall, thinks the media in mid-Missouri are doing a great job, especially when it comes to raising awareness about the conditions at Fulton State Hospital. She plays a powerful procedural role in the House as chair of the rules committee but rarely engages the press directly. On improving Fulton Hospital, however, she has led a public push to

advance a financing plan to build a new facility. The state hospital is one of the nation's oldest active mental hospitals and houses patients in buildings more than a century old.

The Jefferson City News Tribune and local TV stations have covered the unsafe conditions extensively, including visits and interviews inside the facility. The Legislature this session has considered options for financing a major upgrade. Jefferson City-based political weekly The Missouri Times ran a long article prior to the session beginning, which included details from a visit to the facility and quotes from Riddle.

Riddle was a part of a press conference this session with House Speaker Tim Jones, R-Eureka, and House Budget Chair Rick Stream, R-Kirkwood. At the event, the three lawmakers presented the Republican plan to finance the construction of a new hospital and highlighted Riddle's support of improvements to the hospital, which is in her district. Local mid-Missouri outlets, including the News Tribune, MissouriNet and the Fulton Sun, covered the announcements and quoted Riddle in their articles.

"I am very appreciative of the role that the media and journalism has played in relating the problems that the employees face at Fulton State Hospital, and obviously the clients face them as well," she said. "They have been wonderful to come to the facility and do their best to film and take pictures and interviews where they could."

The lawmakers offered a window into how they think about their relationships with members of the press. While they criticized the media for giving too much attention to too few stories, especially the most controversial topics,

lawmakers also conceded that the Capitol press corps has a lot of terrain to cover and not a lot of time or resources to do so.

They appreciate the platform the press has for reaching a large audience and attempt to use that platform to garner attention for the issues that are most important to them. They differed in their specific strategies for dealing with the press and their attitudes to the press generally, but no matter the state of statehouse news bureaus, lawmakers will continue to push to get their message out and their name in the paper.