



## **No PIOs Allowed: How a New York TV station banned public information officers — and got results**

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Years ago, an idea took root in Casey Clark's head.

Clark was a reporter at Seattle's KOMO-TV station, alongside the late Ken Schram. Schram had found that some of the city's parking meters were faulty, and he wanted to talk to officials about it. But he was having trouble getting a decision-maker on the record.

So, Clark remembers Schram setting up a cardboard cutout of the mayor outside of city hall to "interview" it. (Despite a deep-dive into its archives, KOMO-TV was not able to verify all of the details of this story, and Schram and the mayor at the time have since died.)

Nevertheless, Schram's pursuit of a top city official, and his refusal to talk to anyone but the chief decision-maker, stuck with Clark.

Last August, Clark became the news director for WHEC-TV in Rochester, New York. Soon after, he implemented a new, station-wide policy: "Except in breaking news situations when public safety is in question," he wrote, "News10NBC will not interview spokespeople, PIO's, communications directors or any other public relations person."

In other words: We are done with PIOs.

"It needed to happen," Clark said. "It's a slow creep, and you don't realize over time how many layers have grown between us and the policymakers."

A few numbers illustrate the spread of PIOs in the United States.

The National Information Officers Association has seen its membership rise over the past quarter century. NIOA had fewer than 100 members in 1992, according to Executive Director Lisa McNeal. Last year, they had 750. McNeal wrote in an email that they anticipate the numbers to rise again this year.

Two similar groups, the Conference of Court Public Information Officers and the City-County Communications & Marketing Association formed around the same time as the NIOA. According to its website, the CCPIO has more than 100 members today both in the U.S. and abroad, an increase from the two-dozen or so court PIOs that showed up for its first conference. 3CMA has also seen its membership rise in recent years, although Executive Director Scott Lehtonen cautioned that the increase might have as much to do with an improving economy as it does a spike in PIOs.

For reporters in need of a quick sound bite, interviewing a PIO is often the easiest and fastest way to make sure certain viewpoints are represented. Clark emphasized that his newsroom is still happy to put spokespeople on screen if, for example, a suspect is on the loose and every officer involved in the investigation is understandably busy.

But when it comes to stories about policy issues, or budgets, or choices made by public officials? They'll interview the policymakers. Or nobody.

When Berkeley Brean, the station's chief investigative reporter, first read the new policy, he thought: My job just got harder. "Just like water, sometimes we find the easiest path," Brean said. "More often than not, that's the public information officer."

But as he thought about it throughout the day, he warmed to the idea.

"It's forcing us to do what we should be trying to do anyway, which is talk to the decision-makers, the policymakers, or talk to the people who are closest to the story," Brean said.

Clark said the most valuable part of the policy is the ability to ask solid follow-up questions.

That could be seen in two different segments with Jennifer Lewke, another investigative reporter at the station. About two weeks after the policy was implemented, she headed to a hotel whose restaurant had been shut down because, among other things, mouse poop came with the couscous.

A hotel manager agreed to talk. As Lewke asked questions, the manager looked about as excited as Wile E. Coyote pondering the anvil overhead. But he still took responsibility on air. Sort of.

"Before the inspection was over," the manager said in the segment, "I was already calling my immediate supervisors so that I could get help to rectify the situation."

Two days later, Lewke sat down with the county health commissioner and pressed him on the fact that only six full-time inspectors were overseeing the county's 3,000 restaurants. The commissioner said he'd start cross-training other inspectors so that more time could be spent on food. That sort of commitment is hard to get from a spokesperson.

In other stories, not talking to PIOs just means one less interview.

In a story about the New York State Assembly, Brean looked into a longstanding practice that allowed lawmakers to buy their legislative chair for just \$25. The leather-bound chairs had an estimated value of at least \$1,500, and the perk was still available to legislators convicted of crimes.

Brean reached out to all of their region's representatives to see if any of them were planning on buying their chair. Brean received some statements from spokespeople, but none of the representatives were willing to talk. So Brean chucked the statements and reported: "They either declined to answer the question, ignored the question or said they weren't available." Then he

moved on.

There's been no big announcement on air about the policy, although Clark said it was mentioned in a few cases when officials refused to talk.

But the chair story, for example, doesn't feel incomplete without any official statements. It just looks like the reporters gave everybody a chance to talk, and nobody did.

"That's their problem," Brean said. "Every agency, every entity is so concerned about message and perception, they control it very, very carefully."

That is certainly true. NIOA holds an annual conference, and descriptions of their panels read like workshops from an Alternate Universe IRE Conference: "Using the Media To Assist Your Agency," for example, or "how to handle — or at least attempt to control — what was going on."

An FBI bulletin from 2010 noted that PIOs needed to embrace new technology (including "a relatively new Internet phenomenon" called "Twitter") to push back against "savvy reporters" who could bypass them altogether.

Public employees are sometimes trained not to talk to reporters. At the New York State Police Academy, for example, recruit troopers are told that only a supervisor or a PIO is responsible for talking to the media at an incident, according to Beau Duffy, the director of public information for the New York State Police. Only those supervisors receive media guidance at basic training.

When the default position is "don't talk," it can be tough to get someone who is used to deferring to PIOs to go on the record. The key, Brean said, is not springing an interview request on an agency at the last minute. Planning out stories in advance becomes crucial to getting the interviews they want. People are busy. Agencies are overloaded. Brean said he might begin with a PIO, but only as a way to reach somebody else.

Clark emailed agencies in the area to let them know about the policy change. One agency complained, he said, and both he and Brean have heard rumblings that others were either confused or annoyed. But neither could think of times they were denied access or in any way punished because of the policy.

For Clark, the change is just good journalism. "You wouldn't talk to a third party, and put hearsay on TV," Clark said. "Why are we allowing third parties to get in the way?"

#### **SIDEBAR: *Pushing back on PIOs***

*Reporting this article led to a public information officer refusing to give out information — on PIOs.*

*A spokesperson with FEMA initially declined multiple requests to disclose the number of people who have enrolled in FEMA's PIO training program, citing concerns that IRE would improperly equate the number of trainees with the number of PIOs nationwide.*

*In response, IRE filed two Freedom of Information Act requests.*

*One business day later (and 10 days after the initial request), FEMA released two numbers: More than 5,600 people were trained in 2006. More than 12,000 were trained last year, the spokesperson said. FEMA said the increase partially reflected the addition of a new class, did not include numbers from FEMA's regional offices and did not necessarily mean there are more PIOs in the country.*

*Our FOIAs, which asked for more detailed numbers as well as records of internal FEMA communications regarding our request, were still being processed when this issue went to press.*