

# Journalists Really Do Have an Agenda

By CHRIS HEDGES  
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Tom McElroy, 39, an editor at The Associated Press with a silver stud in his left ear and a black bicycle helmet tossed casually on his desk, would not make anyone's list of media heavyweights. But from his small, cluttered cubicle in Rockefeller Center, covered with pages of faxes and news releases, he puts together the Associated Press daybook, a schedule of daily events in the city that often determines what gets covered in New York and what does not.

Groggy editors and reporters at newspapers and at radio and television stations check the daybook daily as they start work. And public relations people, knowing that it is the holy grail of city journalism, sit dog-faced in their offices if their clients' events are not posted on it.

"If an event is not listed on the A.P. daybook it is not worth doing," said Edward Skyler, who works in the public relations department at Bloomberg. "But if we do not get on it, it is usually our own fault. You need to follow up. A fax is not enough. And following up is a lot better than calling TV stations the next day and hearing them say, 'Sorry, it is not on the daybook.' Those words make your heart sink."

The daybook was born in another era. It grew out of The Associated Press's city wire, which, back when New York had about a dozen newspapers, sent reporters to work school board meetings and police precincts and to stalk the halls of city agencies. But by the 1960's, such coverage was no longer in demand. The number of papers dwindled, and the remaining ones began to back away from covering the minutiae of official life in New York. And when the city wire folded in the 1970's, only the daybook remained.

"It has changed," said Sam Boyle, the A.P.'s bureau chief for New York City. "Neither we nor our members are covering every tree in the forest. It is no longer viable. But everyone who wants people to know what is going on sends the event in to the daybook. It is the one spot read by everyone involved in metro coverage."

The daybook is compiled to give members of the media an agenda for major events taking place each day in the city. These events can be news conferences by the mayor or wacky promotional events that are used to leaven the nightly news. All those who subscribe to the A.P. metro or broadcast wires, including this newspaper, receive the service.

On Wednesday morning, Mr. McElroy sifted through faxes that lay piled in a wire mesh box on his desk. He was compiling the daybook for Thursday and decided against listing a recital by the Wagner Society, but he eagerly read about an event planned by the Council on Foreign Relations to be attended by all five Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"This will be good," he said, setting the notice down next to his computer. He routinely tosses out a lot of the blatant promotional events, he said. Many supermodels, in a move that never ceases to lure some photographers, promise in news releases to take off their shirts.

"Even on a busy day I try to put some little nonprofit on that cannot afford a big public relations firm and wants coverage," he said. "When I go home and see it on the news it makes me feel good."

As the events were slowly compiled for release in the afternoon, Michael R. Bloomberg,

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-  4. OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS We Need a New Green Revolution
-  5. Closing the Farm-to-Table Gap in Alaska
-  6. Oregon Pinot Noir Delivers an Element of Surprise
-  7. "Nearly Eternal," a Subversive Take on Food
-  8. A Lonely Planet Wine Guide Lets You Drink It All In
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who may or may not run for mayor, scored a coup by getting on twice. It was Mr. Bloomberg's recent interest in the daybook that helped fuel the speculation about his political ambitions.

"A couple of weeks ago Bloomberg contacted us with an item saying he would be delivering meals to the elderly," Mr. McElroy said. "This immediately pricked everyone's ears. We had not seen him on the daybook. We figured this guy, maybe, was going to run for mayor. When a politician gets started he or she wants to get on the daybook every week."

One of its regulars is Parks and Recreation Commissioner Henry J. Stern, who is an undisputed master at staging visually appealing events for TV news.

The event this particular Thursday, at least as advertised, was enticing. To herald WinterFest 2001, which begins today in Central Park, a singing skier was to serenade the crowd, which consisted of about a dozen reporters and park employees. Boomer the Wonder Dog and urban park rangers were to traverse the East Meadow of Central Park in snowshoes and cross-country skis, pulled by huskies.

But the phone calls from Mr. Stern's office, announcing that the commissioner would be late, began to reach reporters' cell phones about 10:45 that morning. The news was greeted grimly by television crews stomping up and down on plywood set out in the frigid East Meadow.

Forty minutes later, they were still waiting. The commissioner canceled and was replaced by Adrian Benepe, the parks commissioner for the borough of Manhattan. Boomer the Wonder Dog was staying home. A skier, pulled by the huskies, raced around the meadow for the cameras, and Melissa Kleiner, a reporter for Bloomberg Radio, unfolded a printout of her next assignment, taken from the daybook. Her fingers were red with cold. It was a news conference with Jane S. Hoffman, the city's consumer affairs commissioner, at 42 Broadway.

Ms. Hoffman planned to hand out reimbursement checks to people who had been victims of General Home Improvements of Queens, a contractor that had been convicted of fraud.

"We are waiting for the victims," she said, by way of apology for the delay.

"We are the victims," growled Woody Woods, a cameraman with WWOR-TV, in heavy, snow-encrusted boots and black ski pants.

Polly Kreisman, an investigative reporter for WPIX-TV, said she was now covering one event a week from the daybook because her investigative reports, which often take weeks to produce, do not put her on the air often enough.

"Oh, good," she said, glancing toward the props near the lectern, "another giant check."

"Things get covered because they are on the daybook," she said, "but the events may not warrant news coverage. It is just easier. Reporters don't have to do as much work. If you have to be on the air at 5, no matter what, a daybook event is perfect. You do not have to spend the whole morning trying to develop a story."

And so the day ran. A plaque was unveiled at 55 Broad Street to honor New York City's first volunteer organization, the 1737 volunteer fire department. The Suffolk County executive, Robert J. Gaffney, welcomed Miss New York USA, Lisa Pavlakis; American Jewish organizations held a lunch for Israel's new consul general; and the Port Authority's executive director, Robert E. Boyle, spoke about snow removal at Kennedy International Airport.

But things do sometimes go wrong. The Council on Foreign Relations called and said the event with the Joint Chiefs had "erroneously" appeared on the daybook and was closed to the public. Mr. McElroy had to send out an advisory on the wire to alert the media.

And once in a while, pranksters try to get sham events listed, not an easy task because Mr.

McElroy, who has had the job for two months, and other editors are required to investigate every listing.

Joey Skaggs, who describes himself as a media artist, said he often tried to make the daybook and staged events to attract news crews. For example, in a news release he headlined "The Final Curtain," he promised to build a memorial theme park mall, with amusement rides, restaurants and a vast cemetery with urns.

The proposal included a promise to ship the urns to various memorial parks around the world in a time-share arrangement for the dead. He announced that it was a hoax in May after a year of putting out notices and creating an elaborate Web site. The story was picked up by several major news outlets.

"If I am not on the daybook several times a year, I am upset," he said. "Most all of the stories taken from these kinds of press releases are nothing more than hype. They are made up of distortions and half-truths that get passed off as news. All they and I want is attention. The difference is that I am ringing the bell and no one is listening."

But Sam Boyle of The Associated Press said he doubted that Mr. Skaggs made the daybook as often as he claimed.

"We check out the items supplied to us," Mr. Boyle said, "and while we are not always familiar with every individual telling us about every item listed, we have no indication of that many fabricated items."

Thursday concluded with readings by the winners of the National Book Awards in the New York Public Library. It received the least coverage. There were no television crews and only a handful of reporters, in part because the nighttime event came after most news broadcasts.

Writers like Nathaniel Philbrick, the author of "In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex," and Gloria Whelan, the author of the children's book "Homeless Bird," spoke about the loneliness and difficulty of writing.

After work, Mr. McElroy often heads with other journalists to Siberia, a dingy bar in the subway stop at Broadway and 50th Street.

There, he talks with animation about his dream of writing screenplays. He sold a script several years ago to the television show "Law and Order" and is working on his ninth unsold screenplay, the story of the American mercenary Frederick Ward, who trained Chinese soldiers during the Taiping Rebellion in the mid-19th century.

Writing the daybook, he hopes, will not define the rest of his life.

"Anything with the Jets or the Mets gets put on," he said, over a drink of ouzo. "I will put the Yankees and the Giants on, but with not as much enthusiasm. I have yet to put on a screenwriter."

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