

The News Manual

A professional resource for journalists and the media

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Chapter 21: Press & media conferences

In this chapter, we discuss how press conferences can help or hinder journalists. We give advice on what to do at press conferences and how to write stories from them.

What are press and media conferences?

Press conferences (also known as *news conferences*) are occasions when someone with something to say which they believe is newsworthy calls reporters together so that they can tell them all at once. The person calling the press conference usually makes an announcement or statement first then allows reporters to ask questions.

The terms, *media conferences* or *media calls*, are also used occasionally, though usually about an event to which a company publicist invites the media - not necessarily just journalists - in order to promote a product, performance or a celebrity, e.g. a visiting singer or actor. In this chapter we will concentrate on press conferences for journalists.

All sorts of people organise press conferences for all sorts of reasons. A politician may call one to announce a new policy or to deny an allegation. A scientist may call one to reveal a discovery. A police chief may call reporters together to give details of a crime or to ask for public help in solving a case.

Advantages

The main advantage of a press conference to the person calling it is that they do not have to repeat themselves to several different reporters at separate interviews. It also means that their announcement will have maximum impact by being in all the media at the same time (assuming that all the reporters think it is newsworthy).

The main advantage to the journalist is that it reduces the chance of individual newspapers or broadcast stations missing the story. It also allows them to share the workload of questioning the interviewee. If one reporter forgets or overlooks something, another reporter will probably think of it.

Disadvantages

There are disadvantages to the media in press conference, the major of which is that it is more difficult to get an exclusive story from press conferences. When every reporter hears the same words from the interviewee, they cannot keep secrets from each other. There are ways of getting round this problem which we will discuss later.

Press conferences can also give false importance to the topic being promoted. Promoters try to convince journalists that by getting them all in the same place at the same time the topic is of great importance, when often it is nothing more than free publicity or advertising.

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Logistics

For the journalist, press conferences are similar in nature to speeches, and can be covered in much the same ways (see *Chapters 19 and 20: Speeches and meetings*). Here we will discuss the logistics or method of covering press conferences.

It is usual for the person who called the press conference to say what they want first then allow the journalists to ask questions. The speaker controls the situation from the start. They even control where and when the press conference takes place, although if journalists do not like the place or the time of the press conference they should let the organiser know. This is especially important if someone plans to hold a press conference after your deadline for stories.

Many journalists regard press conferences as gifts from the organiser, not to be questioned. Remember, if someone calls a press conference it is usually because they need the publicity you can give them. That gives you some control over the situation.

As with covering speeches and meetings, there are several things you need to remember to make your task easier.

Preparation

As a journalist, you should never go out to cover any story without knowing roughly what to expect. Some research is vital. This can range from asking your editor or chief of staff what the press conference is about to a full-scale search through your local reference library for background material.

Press conferences are usually called to present the latest development of something, whether it is a financial policy or a mass murder. Your background material must, therefore, be as up-to-date as possible. It is not wise to attend a press conference at which a scientist is going to reveal a new source of energy without knowing something about what energy sources are currently available.

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Your newsroom library or cuttings files should provide you with information. Don't forget to look in your picture library when appropriate, for example, in technical developments.

Ask other people in the newsroom. If a politician calls a press conference and politics is not your round, go to the political correspondent for advice. Also use your contacts outside the newsroom for background information. It is bad manners to ask a political opponent to provide you with questions for the politician, but an off-the-record talk with a critic might produce valuable background on which to base some questions.

Once you have done some research, try to prepare some questions in advance. These should be good enough to provide you with a story if the announcement itself is not very newsworthy. Remember, people who call press conferences will not always have your skill in recognising a news angle.

Your questions do not have to be on the topic the organiser of the press conference wishes to talk about. For example, if a public figure has been accused of corruption then calls a press conference to announce a new move in foreign policy, it is quite fair to ask them questions about the corruption allegations. They may not wish to answer them, but that should never stop a good journalist from asking questions.

Many people are suspicious of reporters' questions, and may ask you to provide written questions in advance. This is acceptable if their sole purpose is to give you more accurate answers. It may, however, be an attempt to stop unpleasant questions. If you suspect that this is the case, you should try to get a promise that you will be allowed to ask other questions at the press conference itself. These are called supplementary questions. If they will not agree, you must ask yourself (and your editor) whether the press conference is worth attending.

On arrival

As with covering a speech or meeting, you should try to arrive in good time for a press conference. Because some journalists are bad time-keepers, many organisers will wait until the major media organisations are present before starting the press conference. However, you cannot rely on this. Besides, it is bad manners to arrive late for any appointment.

Positioning is quite important, especially at large press conferences. You should always sit near to the speaker, so that you do not miss anything said (even whispers to an aide or adviser). If there are many journalists present, sitting in the centre of the front row will ensure that you are not overlooked at question time. It is important that you hear questions from other reporters. If you are seated at the front and you cannot hear the question, you can be sure that the interviewee will not hear it either, so it will have to be repeated anyway.

If you work for radio or television, or wish to record the press conference to support your notes, arrive with enough time to set up your microphone in front of the interviewee. For recording question time, you should either sit beside the interviewee holding the microphone so that you can point it towards questioners at the right moment, or use a tape recorder which has two microphones (usually stereo machines), one positioned in front of the interviewee, the other pointed towards the questioners.

If you work for radio or television, you should also ask for an individual interview when the conference ends. Apart from the fact that you can get better quality sound and pictures in a one-to-one interview, every news organisation likes to give its audience the impression that it is the main supplier of news on an event. A babble of questions from other journalists at a press conference destroys that impression for broadcasters. Radio and television reporters should make a note of all interesting questions - whether their own or from other reporters - and ask them again during their one-to-one interview.

When the conference starts

Establish straight away whether what is being said is "on the record" (in which case everything can be quoted); "background" or "unattributed material" (in which the information can be quoted but not the name of the informant); or "off the record" (in which neither the information nor the informant can be quoted). "Off the record" information is for the reporter's personal information. Too much "off the record" information will undermine the credibility of your story, so try to get the interviewee to make statements "on the record" whenever possible. (See *Chapter 59: Sources of information* and *Chapter 60: sources and confidentiality*.)

You should also establish at the start who the speaker represents on this occasion, if it has not already been made clear. For example, is the Police Minister speaking as a minister or as an MP? Quite often, an organisation may provide a spokesperson to give a press conference. This could be a public servant, a secretary or a press officer. Ask immediately whether they are speaking personally, for a department or for the government.

As with a speech or a meeting, you should make good notes of what is said. Mark the important points in your notes as you go along. A statement may not be clear or may raise an interesting question. Make a quick note of anything you will want to ask at question time.

Question time

Always try to ask at least one question, if only to show your presence.

Phrase all your questions either (a) to clarify statements you did not understand or (b) to get new information. Avoid asking friendly questions simply to cover up an embarrassing silence.

It is difficult to get an exclusive story from a press conference, because every reporter hears all the statements, questions and answers. If you have gone to the press conference with some information which you think will give you an exclusive story and it is not mentioned during the conference, do not mention it during question time. Wait until the other reporters have left then ask your questions. If speakers are unwilling to give a private interview, tempt them with a statement like: "There is something important I want to ask you that I don't want anyone else to hear." It may spark their interest and you will probably get your interview.

Not only should you note what is said at a press conference, but you should also be aware of what is not said. If you go there expecting a certain announcement and it is not made, don't shrug your shoulders and leave. Ask about the topic. They may have something to hide.

At the end

Do not be in a hurry to get away, unless you are facing a tight deadline. Hang around on the chance of getting background information, picking up a bit of gossip or simply developing contacts.

If you have arranged a face-to-face interview, remind your interviewee and take them somewhere quiet to conduct it. If several reporters have been granted individual interviews, make sure that you get your turn.

If you work for a newspaper or television, you should ask for any pictures you think you might need. For example, if a police chief says they are hunting an escaped criminal you should automatically ask if they have a picture of the man for publication. Also, if you want to illustrate your story with a picture of the speaker, think how you can get a better picture than simply a shot of him at the press conference. For example, if the Health Minister is launching a campaign to test people for chest cancer, will he pose for pictures with an X-ray machine - preferably being x-rayed himself?

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Writing the story

There are several things which you must include in your story. These are:

- The names and identities of speakers;
- The key points of any announcements, denials or questions, plus necessary background details;
- Plenty of strong quotes.

Unlike a speech or meeting, your story does not have to include details such as the time and place of the press conference. In fact, it does not have to include the fact that the news came from a press conference at all unless that is of significance to the story as a whole.

If a public figure calls a press conference to deny an allegation, that fact should be reported. If a police spokesperson is simply conducting a regular weekly press briefing, that detail is not necessary.

Certainly you should never include the fact that it was a press conference in the intro, unless that is significant. Such a case would be if a minister was expected to announce a major policy change and then cancelled the scheduled press conference at the last minute.

In the following example, we mention the press conference in the intro to the Right story, because the cancellation of the press conference is the news. It shows that there is disagreement in Cabinet - a fact which we report in the second paragraph. In the intro to the Wrong story, the news is the theft of the aircraft, so the press conference itself should not have been mentioned:

RIGHT:

The Foreign Minister today cancelled a Press conference at which he was expected to announce new sanctions against South Africa.

It is understood that the last-minute cancellation was due to a disagreement in Cabinet over the sanctions.

WRONG:

A police chief today told a Press conference about the theft of a light aircraft from Jacksons Airport.

If a press conference is called to discuss a single issue, your choice of intro should be fairly straightforward. You structure the intro around the main point and write the rest of the story in descending order of merit of the other key points.

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Press conferences that cover several topics

Press conferences often raise a number of issues, especially when they are regular weekly or monthly press briefings. Good examples of this are White House press briefings in the United States or daily press conferences hosted by police departments to give reporters details of recent crimes, accidents or other incidents.

There are four basic ways you can write news stories from such multi-issue press conferences:

- write separate stories on each topic.
- write one big story covering all the topic, but with an intro on one angle.
- write one big story with a composite intro.
- write a composite story with subordinate stories.

This is not as complicated as it might seem. By "composite", we simply mean putting several things together in one place, for example in an intro. Let us look at each of the four approaches individually:

Separate stories

Write a separate news story on each topic. Each story should be self-contained, not relying on the other stories for any details. This kind of approach is used after press conferences where several quite different topics are discussed, such as the police press briefing to give details of the previous day's crimes.

One big story with an intro based on one angle

Choose the main key point, write your intro around that then continue writing your story on that topic. Later in the story you mention the other topics, using words like "meanwhile", "also announced" and "at the same time" to show that you are changing topics. Each of the subordinate topics will need some explanation, but they do not require the full intro treatment. Use this approach when there are several related topics, but one is much more important than all the rest.

One big story with a composite intro

Write a composite intro, mentioning all the key points in it, then give details, one topic at a time, in descending order of importance. An example of a composite intro is:

The Prime Minister yesterday revealed plans to lower taxes, build a new airport in Madang and tighten the laws on foreign ownership of businesses.

In revealing new Cabinet initiatives, Mr Garea said...

Use this approach when there are several related topics of roughly equal importance.

Composite main story with subordinate stories

Write a short composite story, with either a composite intro or a general intro summarising all the topics. Then write separate stories on each of the different topics. The main story will usually be in bold type or in a prominent position, so readers know to read it first. They will then go on to read the subordinate stories. This approach is used in similar circumstances to the big story with a composite intro, but means that you can usually devote more space in your paper (or time in your bulletin) to each topic. You can also give the different topics individual treatment, such as their own headlines, pictures or diagrams.

Try to get hold of copies of some major regional or international newspapers, to see how the four approaches are used. You will normally get some idea from the stories themselves whether they came from a single press conference. You will probably find stories from one press conference are on related topics and contain comments from the same people.

Whichever style you select, you should write your story as you would any hard news story, never leaving the reader or listener with any unanswered questions. Background details are very important. If they are not given at the press conference itself, you must fill them in later by research or follow-up interviews.

Finally, although press conferences usually involve question-and-answer sessions, print journalists should avoid using the questions themselves in your story. This is a good rule for most interviews.

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TO SUMMARISE:

Press conferences are a useful way of getting information if you use them to your advantage.

Always prepare yourself before attending a press conference. Find out something about the possible topics and the people holding the press conference.

Arrive with enough time to settle in before the conference starts.

Always ask at least one question.

If you think you have an exclusive story, do not reveal it to other journalists at the conference.

Radio and television journalists should try to record an individual interview after the conference.

Write as you would any news story, bearing in mind that there are different ways to deal with press conferences which discuss several separate topics.

In newspapers, do not include your questions in the story - only the newsworthy answers.

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