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Politicians and the Press in the Archives: Milwaukee

Matt Blessing

Henry W. Maier served as mayor of Milwaukee for seven consecutive terms between 1960 and 1988, a national record for a big-city mayor. Soon after Maier retired from public office, the records of his administration—nearly 700 cubic feet of textual documents, audiotapes, photographs, and memorabilia—were transferred to the Milwaukee Urban Archives (MUA) on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. (The MUA is a regional branch of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Archives.) About one year after Maier's mayoral records were accessioned at the MUA, a processing archivist and a graduate student began to arrange and describe the materials, completing the project in slightly less than two years.

Henry Maier's longtime battle with the local press corps, particularly the *Milwaukee Journal*, was legendary in the city. Throughout his long tenure as mayor, Maier and the press had debated both the most important and most trivial issues of the era. At the height of their conflict, Maier had stubbornly refused to acknowledge reporters from the *Milwaukee Journal* at his weekly press conferences. Maier's bitter conflicts with the press did not end after he retired. The mayor-turned-professor emeritus kept it no secret that his forthcoming political memoir would set the record straight about the local press corps, while the *Journal* continued to publish wry news bits and satire about the former mayor and his staff.

Because the mayoral records were to be made available soon after Maier's retirement from a long career, many issues remained

acutely sensitive. Staff at the Milwaukee Urban Archives were not surprised when journalists from several metropolitan newspapers requested access to Maier's mayoral records. The archives staff was fully aware of their responsibility to provide equal access to all public records as prescribed by both the Wisconsin Open Records Law and standard archival ethics, but they also saw the potential for a serious conflict.

At the root of the problem was Maier's belief that the mayoral records were his personal papers. Soon after the records had arrived at the archives, Maier asked that they be closed to researchers until he had completed his biography. The senior archivist explained that the records were public records available to any researcher and could not legally be restricted. On subsequent visits, however, the archives staff chose not to correct the former chief executive when he spoke of "my papers." The records were, in fact, closed for a period of time during the early stages of processing, temporarily delaying the conflict.

The archives staff permitted access to Maier's mayoral records as soon as intellectual control of the materials had been established. The senior archivist sent Maier a memorandum telling him that the records were being made available, but did not receive an acknowledgment from him. A copy of the memorandum was also sent to the library administration. Researchers, most of whom were journalists, were required to use a rough draft of the inventory while the processing staff completed the descriptive portions. Not surprisingly, patrons

immediately selected materials on many of the most important and controversial decisions and policies of the Maier administration, materials related to urban renewal programs of the 1960s, political campaigns, civil rights leaders, and other prominent individuals with whom the mayor dealt. A popular neighborhood weekly, the *Southside Spirit*, was the first Milwaukee newspaper to publish articles based on Maier's mayoral records. For four consecutive weeks a feature-length investigative article on the Maier administration appeared on the front page of the *Spirit*. Based almost entirely on records available at the MUA, the first article captured the tension and fears inside the mayor's office during the city's 1967 civil disturbances. Lengthy and often unflattering quotations by Maier and his staff about several civil rights activists drawn from the mayoral records were used in the article. Subsequent articles in the *Spirit* highlighted mayor Maier's campaign tactics and strategies, internal conflicts among his staff, the mayor's disputes with the press, and other topics likely to embarrass him.

Preparing for criticism from Maier and his former staff, the senior archivist decided to issue a memorandum to the student and paraprofessional staff who provided much of the reference service. The intent was twofold: 1) to prevent any violation of Wisconsin's Open Records Law by the staff and 2) to provide the paraprofessional staff with the information it needed to handle basic phone inquiries about the mayoral records. The memorandum reminded staff that the mayoral records were unrestricted public records belonging to the people of Wisconsin and available to any patron who agreed to follow the rules of the reading room. It also noted that the archives staff was not responsible for interpretations and conclusions drawn by researchers. Finally, students were warned not to violate state privacy statutes by releasing the names of researchers to other parties. The memorandum was routed to all staff, then posted on the reference room desk for all part-time assistants to read. Copies of the memorandum were sent to library administrators.

What happened next remains unclear. Staff think that a journalist using the archives overheard and misinterpreted a conversation between archives staff members, then conveyed the misinformation to reporters at both the *Milwaukee Journal* and the *Downtown Edition*, who contrived juicy news bits about Maier's causing difficulties at the MUA and complaining to the library administration about open access to his papers. The *Milwaukee Journal* chose to include the information in its humor and gossip column, a popular section read by many of the paper's 300,000 subscribers. The other newspaper, the *Downtown Edition*, chided Maier and several former aides that "tampering with archives is a no-no!" Journalism based on uncorroborated secondhand information had placed the archives staff in the midst of the decades-old conflict between the press and Henry Maier.

Less than a week later, the *Milwaukee Journal* published reproduced portions of a magazine article about Maier in which the former chief executive had annotated the margins with dozens of colorful expletives. Next, *Milwaukee Magazine*, a monthly periodical, published a lengthy story about Maier's covert strategies in dealing with the press, with lengthy quotations drawn from documents in the mayoral records.

Maier was infuriated by the articles, and angry phone calls to the library administration became more frequent. Maier again requested that the archives staff find a way to restrict the records. A career politician, Maier also contacted many of his old political allies in state and local government to pressure the library administration to conform to his wishes. To explain the archive's mandated responsibilities and public records laws now appeared futile. For years Maier had been allowed to believe that the mayoral records were his personal property. Soon after the *Spirit* articles appeared, the senior archivist made the decision to relay every development in the Maier situation to his supervisor, the library director. Issuing two or three memoranda weekly for several weeks, the staff was able to describe precisely what had been said during each conversation with Maier. Because the library administration was kept

abreast of developments from the very beginning, they came to view the situation as much their problem as that of the archives staff. The archivist's reports also served to educate library administrators in archival principles and public records laws, with which they were not familiar. Most importantly, the memoranda reduced the chances that management would be surprised or embarrassed because of a lack of information. This was made clear when the library director was able to respond to requests from the chancellor's office about problems in the archives. It is important to note that communications with the library administration were not significantly different from those during routine times. Many public relations specialists argue that crisis situations are best handled by more intensive application of standard communications practices. The standard form of communication in this case, the FYI memorandum, had effectively built confidence and trust within the library administration. A simple, straightforward, and consistently practiced communications system allowed the staff to manage this problem, knowing that they already had the support of the library administration.

A similar communications strategy was subsequently pursued with the local press, especially with the staff of the *Milwaukee Journal*. This was a relatively easy task, since no news-gathering organization wanted to damage a working relationship with a source of free, easily accessible, one-of-a-kind information. The newspapers always respected "off the record" explanations when they were requested by the archives staff. The senior archivist typically asked to review press quotations before they were printed. Journalists were cooperative and agreed to print retractions when they had erred.

It is important to remember that most news agencies depend heavily upon public relations personnel for information. The preeminent scholar of public relations, Scott M. Cutlip, has shown that nearly 45 percent of all stories published in newspapers originated from public relations practitioners. (Ironically, Professor Cutlip's studies were conducted in Milwau-

kee.) With a bit of skill, a good public relations practitioner will rarely experience any difficulty getting a story printed.

Nevertheless, relations with the press in this case might have been better as might the reporting itself. That no reporter from the *Milwaukee Journal* contacted the archives staff before issuing a story based on secondhand information is evidence of this. Better communications with the local press might have prevented publication of damaging information and produced more substantive, high-quality articles in some of the publications. Dealing with the tabloid press or individual "scoop artists" is, of course, infinitely more difficult. Overall, the Milwaukee press corps was consistently cooperative in printing retractions but careless in releasing unsubstantiated news. Archivists would be wise to consider the individual nature of their own community newspapers and television stations, establishing and building a working relationship with a contact person at each media outlet. Never assume, however, that today's journalists will regularly check all information or seek second and third party confirmation.

The conflict between Henry Maier and Milwaukee's press corps was more than a quarter-century old when attention focused on the Milwaukee Urban Archives. The dispute over access to the mayoral records consisted of one short chapter in a very long story. There is no doubt that the episode permanently damaged the MUA's relationship with Henry Maier. Preliminary planning for an oral history project involving Maier and his staff was canceled. Celebrating the official opening of the records was, of course, out of the question.

In sum, the controversy resulted in an overall improvement in communications, understanding, and mutual confidence between the archives and the library administration. To a somewhat lesser extent, the relationship between the archives and several reporters improved. Journalists increasingly came to recognize a common interest with the archives, insuring that all individuals have equal access to information as required by the state's open records law. Each party seemed to become

more sensitive to the other's needs. The publicity also attracted more journalists to the archives to examine other archival and manuscript collections.

Lessons

1. Recognize a public relations problem when you see it. Anticipate adversarial use and public controversy, and practice responding to it.

2. Instruct staff carefully in how to respond to contentious donors, aggressive journalists, and other users. Keep a uniform public position, if you can.

3. Find ways to check on the accuracy of a story *before* it is published. "Could you repeat my quotes?" or "How do you understand these

events?" are legitimate interviewee-to-journalist questions.

4. Keep upper-level administration aware of what is happening by written memos. Report daily, if necessary. Also tell public relations staff in a large institution. Avoid surprises at upper levels. Help administration to own your problem.

5. Have written fact sheets available about collection policy: what public records are, who can access them, when, etc.

6. Understand the habits and constraints of journalists today—time, the tendency not to check sources, pressure to do the attention-grabbing story. Adapt to these habits and constraints.