



Municipal Technical Advisory Service
INSTITUTE *for* PUBLIC SERVICE

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Part IV - Know the Things You Cannot Change

Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the MTAS website ([mtas.tennessee.edu](http://www.mtas.tennessee.edu)). This website is maintained daily by MTAS staff and seeks to represent the most current information regarding issues relative to Tennessee municipal government.

We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with municipal government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other MTAS website material.

Sincerely,

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Regardless of the relationship you have with the local news media, there is one fact that will *always* be true: The news media will always have the last word about you. You will never have the audience that newspapers, radio, and television (and now, the Internet) have available to them, nor will you ever meet as many of your constituents in person during your lifetime as the news media will reach in a single day.

If for no other reason, therefore, it is best to try to get along with the news media in your community. You don't have to like reporters, nor must you allow them to be abusive or rude. But because they will always have the last word and because they speak to every person in your town, it is in your best interest to try to cultivate a professional relationship with the news media. Treat them as you would want to be treated and perhaps they will do the same, although there is no guarantee.

While you cannot change them, here's a short list of simple truths about news reporters of which you should be aware:

1. Reporters usually already know the answers to the questions they ask.

The fact that a reporter asks you questions does not mean he or she does not already know the answers. Reporters often ask questions about things they already know. In these instances, the point of the question is not to learn new information, but to determine what you know—and to assess your truthfulness.

2. Your opponents, rivals, and enemies will also be interviewed.

You cannot reasonably expect reporters to ignore differences of opinion that may exist in your community. In most cases, reporters will actually seek out the opinions of your opponents in an effort to present a balanced news story. When interviewing these rivals, the reporter may use your responses in an attempt to provoke a reaction that will be interesting on camera or in the next day's newspaper.

3. Your friends, supporters and teammates will also be interviewed—and may damage your position.

You may be the only person in city government authorized to give interviews to the press, but reporters are not obliged to respect this policy. Before or after your interview, reporters are likely to talk with other city officials and employees about any particular subject, and they will be quick to note any inconsistencies or conflicts in the story. This can be especially unnerving for mayors, city managers, and public information officers who have worked hard to deliver the city's message, only to hear it contradicted by other, usually anonymous, city employees.

4. The interview is not over until the reporter leaves your presence.

Just because the reporter has turned off his tape recorder and is packing up to leave your office, do not assume the interview is over. Anything you say to the reporter as he or she is walking out the door may be added to the interview. Avoid making post-interview remarks.

5. The headlines are not written by the reporter.

A reporter may make every effort to accurately quote and describe his interview with you. Once the article is written, however, the story is handed over to various editors who attach a headline designed to attract the readers' attention. It sometimes happens that the headline does not accurately reflect the content of the reporter's story.

6. The reporter's story will be edited by others at the paper.

Just as the headlines are written by others, a reporter's story is reviewed and amended by various supervisors, editors, and the like. Articles often are shortened to fit the available newspaper space or air time. Oftentimes, the deleted parts of the story are precisely those parts containing your best material.

7. Giving interviews to student newspapers is not a guarantee of safety.

High school and college newspapers will often call local government offices to arrange interviews with various city officials. Do not assume such "minor league" publications will not require adequate preparation and care. Young, inexperienced, apprentice reporters are much more likely to misquote and mischaracterize your remarks than the full-time professionals from the "real" newspaper in town. Furthermore, a lot of people read these school papers.

When you speak to a reporter, you are speaking to the citizens in your community. You may not like or trust the reporter, but do not be confused about who you are really speaking to during an interview. The

public can figure out who is being a professional during an interview and who is not. The best way to deal with a tough reporter is simply to let the public see you at your best.

DISCLAIMER: The letters and publications written by the MTAS consultants were written based upon the law at the time and/or a specific sets of facts. The laws referenced in the letters and publications may have changed and/or the technical advice provided may not be applicable to your city or circumstances. Always consult with your city attorney or an MTAS consultant before taking any action based on information contained in this website.

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