

# Working on the Dark Side

The candid backstage confessions of former New York State Governor Hugh Carey's press officer.

By William F. Snyder

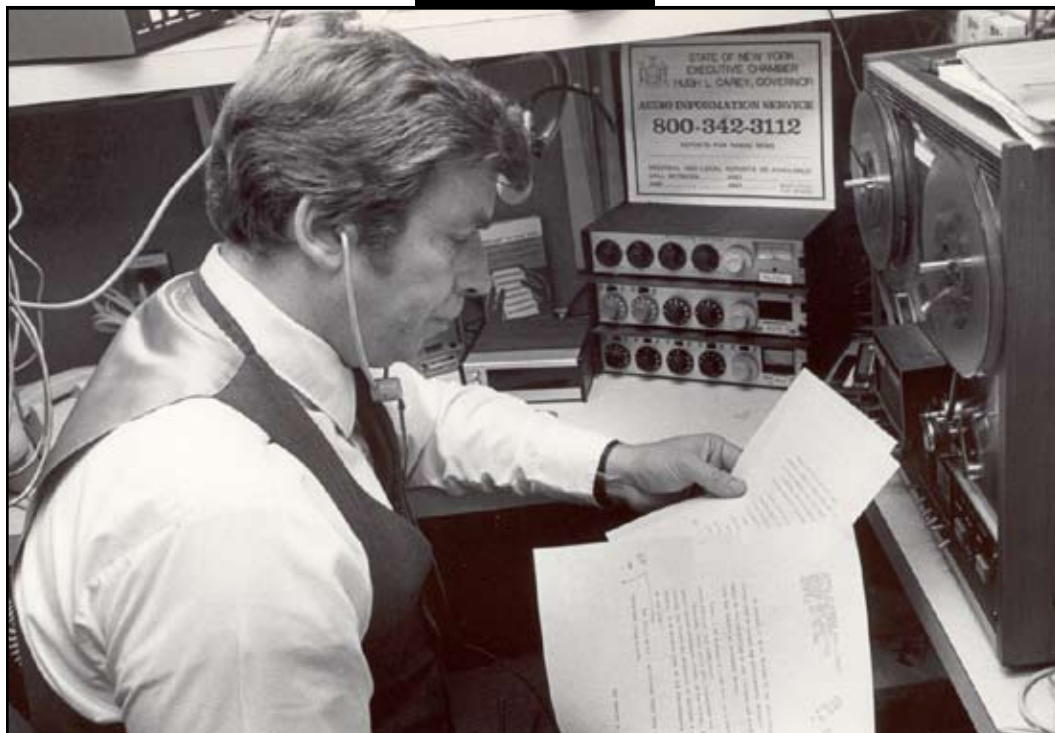
**M**y career in broadcasting began in 1957 when a chance audition over the phone landed me a weekend news job on WNDR-AM in Syracuse, New York, one of that market's first "pace" radio stations—lots of jingles and noise and, of course, Top-40 tunes. An impressionable teenager, I "ripped and read" the headlines, introduced by a powerful news open (Man, it was cool!) and goaded by my weekend DJ mentor to read it fast and hard. At the time, I had no understanding of journalism or reporting—I was on the RADIO! And I chose Bill Fortune (my real middle name), as my on-the-air moniker, to which I still answer when someone recalls my broadcast adventures.

News was always on the periphery of my disc jockeying through the 60's, when I spun 45's at WHOL-AM in Allentown, PA and later at WHEN-AM back in Syracuse. At one point, I caught the early-morning news assignment at WHEN, rewriting local stories from the newspaper and trying to come up with stories of my own over the phone—usually without success. With no formal

training and spotty coaching from the news director, my sense of journalism was, well, improvisational. There's a newscast on the hour and half-hour and you need to fill three minutes. And read the commercial.

Later, for airing my choice of music rather than from the station's playlist, I was dismissed. I was lucky enough to be in a market where the public (then educational) TV station was starting up and looking for a program manager—cheap. Out of work (boy, did I come cheap!) and with some broadcast experience, I was hired. WCNY-TV went on the air Christmas week of 1965, but after a year, it became clear I wasn't a television programming whiz. With management's encouragement, I decided to look elsewhere for my next career opportunity.

I applied for a reporter's job at the Syracuse *Herald Journal*. I submitted a writing sample, was hired and promptly assigned to the obit desk. In those days, obituaries were actually written and edited by the newspaper. It was serious journalism. Shortly thereafter, a couple of reporters bolted from the city desk



The author in Audio Information Service studio, 1980.

and I was thrown onto the street as a general-assignment reporter. The city editor, Joe Ganley, was my journalism professor: Two sources. Three is better. Attribute everything. Check, double check. Fairness. Balance. Accuracy. And get it done on deadline, this is a daily newspaper, dammit!

Now I felt equipped to be a journalist.

Seeking to legitimize my decade of practical experience in broadcast and print, I entered college at the State University of New York in Albany. I stayed in the business on weekends at WRGB-TV in Schenectady, producing and editing the local news and, later, reporting and anchoring. After graduation, I took on the 11 pm anchor assignment at a time when broadcast journalism was legitimate, even revered. And credible. Yes, this was a long time ago.

As producer, editor and anchor of an

11 pm newscast seen by about a million people each night, there was a palpable weight of responsibility attached to covering, editing and reporting each and every story. But, in the mid-70's when my "numbers skewed old," the management decided to move me from the anchor chair to the street. I asked for the Capitol beat.

New York politics was and is a good story. The elaborate Victorian architecture of the Capitol building, the grand chambers of the State Legislature and the hushed halls of the Executive Chamber could impress the most nonchalant reporter, and the people who worked there, even post-Watergate, seemed to have some measure of dignity and altruism. At least, that's how it seemed from the outside, but always with a dose of skepticism. Covering the Capitol was still honorable work. There were occasional

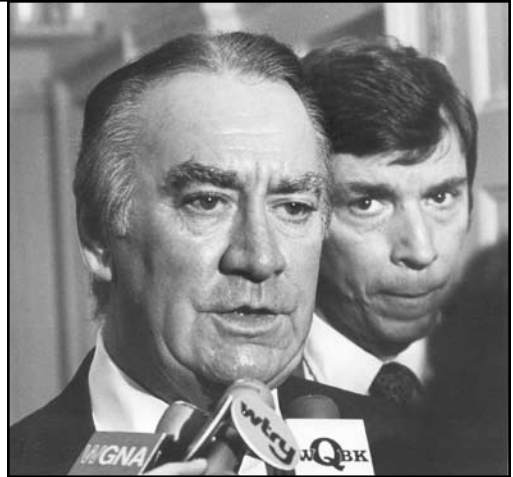
plum assignments, like the one that put me on Air Force One for an exclusive interview with then-Vice President and former New York Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller.

Brooklyn Congressman Hugh L. Carey came to the New York Statehouse in 1975, a recent widower arriving with his gaggle of children (a dozen!), who moved with abandon into the Executive Mansion. He was a colorful guy. "Run for governor," Carey once advised a would-be candidate, "It comes with a house." But the day he walked in the door, the New York City fiscal crisis fell on him. In his first "State of the State" Address he warned, "The days of wine and roses are over."

The whirlwind of saving New York City from bankruptcy was a great story to cover from an upstate perspective. City Democrat Carey faced determined opposition from the upstate Republican majority in the New York State Senate, led by an imperious politician from Binghamton. After the federal government refused to help and President Gerald Ford's famous quote, "Ford to City: Drop Dead!" appeared on the front page of the *New York Daily News*, Carey convinced the upstate Senate and downstate investment bankers and union leaders to do the right thing and got the U.S. Congress to guarantee new bonds to cover the City's debt.

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Beyond upstate-downstate prejudices, my stories about the New York City fiscal



Snyder with Gov. Hugh L. Carey as he speaks to reporters, 1982.

crisis were subject to the growing pressures to make TV news more accessible and entertaining. Believe me, as important as its work is, the Legislature will probably never be fodder for reality TV. The occasional story suggestions from the sales side of the house were disconcerting and sometimes unethical, I thought. The quest for ratings by appealing to the broadest audience resulted in the dumbing down of state-government news to the point where I felt it was no longer responsible journalism.

After nine years with the Capital District's most respected and venerable TV station, it was time to move on. WHERE I moved surprised everyone.

Hugh Carey was fun to cover. His quips and intelligence were refreshing, his political intuition was brilliant and his style of governing was inspired. He was the right man at the right time for New York. I respected him and I entertained thoughts

of working with him. On my beat at the Capitol, I had come to know some of his

staffers and his deputy press secretary, Howard Clark (a former Associated Press Albany bureau chief), quietly asked if I'd be interested in joining Carey's press operation. Press Secretary Jim Vlasto interviewed me and decided it would be a good idea to have a broadcast guy in the press office for the 1978 re-election campaign. So, after a disconcertingly penetrating interview with Carey in the fall of '77, the Governor approved my hiring and I went over to the "dark side."

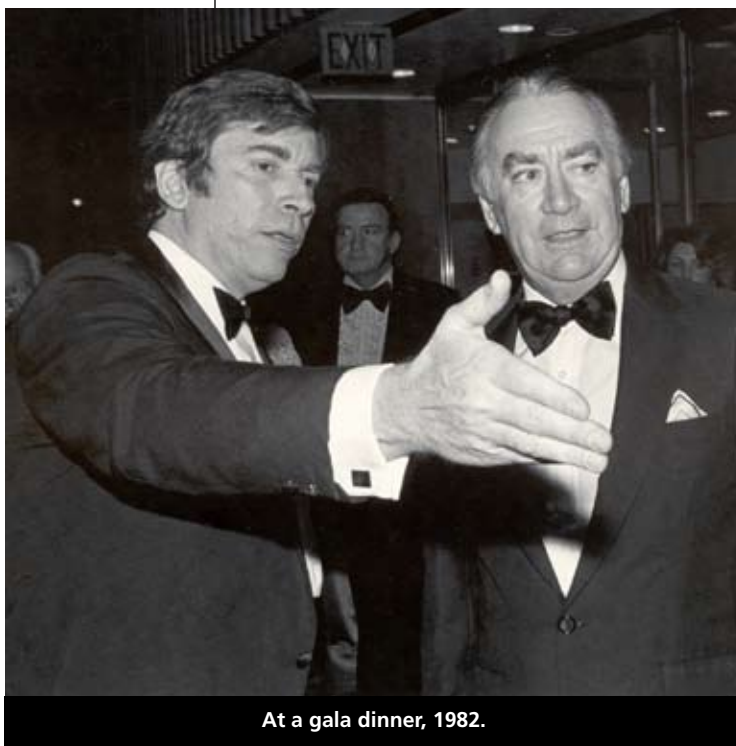
"Why would you want to be a 'flack,'" my news director complained, "a mouthpiece for a damn politician?" Many of my colleagues were puzzled by my defection. Some stopped talking to me. I was a little surprised by the assumption that I could no longer be trusted to tell the truth. I was reassured on my first day on the job. I walked into a morning press conference where Governor Carey was being harangued by a vocal member of the Albany Legislative Correspondents Association (LCA) about free trips by members of his family on the State airplane. The issue had never come up before. Carey said he'd look into it. He soon reimbursed the State for hauling his kids around on State aircraft.

After some time

writing messages and proclamations (like sitting at the obit desk, only not as lively), I discovered there had never been a broadcast professional in the governor's press office—a "tonsil artist," as Howard Clark put it. Everything was print-oriented. The

daily clips were the bible. I proposed a radio feed setup, "The Executive Chamber Audio Information Service." I followed the Governor around and recorded his utterances and put them on the audio system to support the Administration's message. Radio newsrooms around the State got a placard with an "800" number to call for "actualities" of Governor Carey. Not surprisingly, business was brisk since few radio stations outside of Albany could afford Capitol coverage. E.J. Dionne of

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At a gala dinner, 1982.

*The New York Times* and others tried to write negative pieces, but could only find one radio news director to sniff, “We get our own stuff.”

Carey’s press office was said to have had a revolving door, as a parade of short-lived press secretaries and directors of communications moved in and out of the office next to the Governor’s with alarming regularity. Carey, demanding and quick to criticize, was tough to work for. During one of the press office personnel shifts, I found myself in the role of principal “official” press officer on the road with Hugh Carey in the 1978 gubernatorial campaign. There was a campaign press guy who handed out the campaign press releases, and me, handing out the gubernatorial grist. Reporters would sneer and grumble about the advantages of incumbency. I asked if they would have every incumbent resign their office in order to run again.

During the campaign, criticism of the Audio Information Service grew louder. Charges of “managing the news” emerged, on top of questions about the appropriateness—even the legality—of using State resources to get Hugh Carey on the radio. At one point, I asked an especially obnoxious reporter (a role I never played, of course) if he would have us hire the Associated Press to write our press releases or if it was okay for us to buy and use typewriters for our press releases. What was the difference in using a tape recorder and the telephone to get the Governor’s message out? As I remember, there wasn’t a good answer.

In January of the election year, the Governor’s Office, upon my suggestion, assumed responsibility for the television production of his “State of the State”

address, relieving public TV of that chore, which they relinquished (surprisingly, I thought) without protest. I had pointed out to the Governor and his senior advisors that the “State of the State” was our show and we should decide on how it was produced and presented. Later, we also assumed control of the Governor’s executive budget presentation. To this day, official television coverage of both events is still produced by the Governor’s Office.

### **The Irish flair for poetry and hyperbole was never in short supply when Hugh Carey was around.**

In March of 1981, our effort to bypass the LCA and its reporters to go directly to a radio audience was sorely tested. Governor Carey, bristling at what he thought were politically motivated and exaggerated claims of toxic contamination at the State Office Building in Binghamton, proclaimed he’d “drink a glass of PCB’s and run a mile afterwards!” The Irish flair for poetry and hyperbole was never in short supply when Hugh Carey was around. The press corps whooped and ran to their cubicles to write their stories with obvious relish. I told Carey’s senior staff we had to put it on the audio service if we were to have any credibility. At least the quote would be surrounded by some context, for what it was worth. They all disagreed and regarded me as a little crazy, but I put it on. No, it didn’t change the story and its intimation that the chief executive of the State was, well, not afraid to speak his mind. But the audio service continued to peddle our material to maybe even more radio stations statewide.

Around the same time, I began to plan occasional video news feeds of

gubernatorial goings-on in addition to video of press conferences, which had been distributed by the State University's New York Network (NYN) to public TV stations around the State and then passed around to the commercial stations in each market. It was a practice that went back to NYN's founding in 1967, which allowed then-Governor Nelson Rockefeller to be seen on local TV news programs statewide.

We managed to accomplish a couple of other-than-press conference feeds but fell on hard times when a prayer breakfast at the Executive Mansion was announced to the press, but no one came. (Cocktail receptions, on the other hand, usually drew a full house.) It left our "official" camera as the only one there, so we went ahead and edited a package and sent out a feed. We were pummeled by reporters and columnists for blatant news management and nefarious publicity peddling despite the fact it was coverage of an announced event overlooked by the entire Capitol press corps. Carey's staff decided we should lay low on the TV stuff.

Near the end of his second term in 1982, Governor Carey announced he would not run, so I concluded my first public-service experience—without regret—and a sense that I had been in the presence of greatness. I have enduring respect for Hugh L. Carey.

Carey was succeeded by Mario M. Cuomo. I produced the television coverage of Cuomo's Inauguration and his first "State of the State" address and was sent out to the agency pastures, but recalled for the "State of the State" each year. Cuomo was a good speaker but seemed less interested in electronic



Snyder with Gov. Mario M. Cuomo at a "State of the State" rehearsal, 1985.

communication. The audio service persisted, but despite the presence of later-to-be-NBC's Tim Russert as Cuomo's first press secretary, expanded TV coverage by the Governor's Office did not materialize.

Finally, in 1985, I came to my present assignment as the director of the State University's New York Network (NYN). Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., the SUNY Chancellor, wanted to leverage the Network for University purposes and challenged me to reinvent the aging interconnect of New York's public TV stations. We created "SUNYSAT," a Ku band satellite network to replace the terrestrial PBS interconnect, which also provided a gateway to all 64 SUNY campuses.

As it turned out, NYN and SUNYSAT also provided a gateway to every TV news organization. We found ourselves in service to the major networks to provide "talk backs" with newsmakers who happened to be in the Albany area. It was, coincidentally, a convenient way to

get Governor Cuomo on ABC's *Nightline* and other network news programs.

When George Pataki came to the Statehouse in 1995, his Director of Communications, the formidable Zenia Mucha (now ABC/Disney's corporate spokesperson), erected what the LCA dubbed "Fort Pataki," in the form of a closed-door policy for the press. Previously, reporters could roam the halls of the Executive Chamber and drop into offices where a story might be mined. No more. The salty-tongued gubernatorial spokeswoman often responded to tough questions with only an epithet and the LCA was in an uproar. They wrote story after story about Mucha's abusive press-relations strategy—a story that quickly became repetitive and eventually inconsequential. And Zenia had 'em where she wanted 'em.

## **The recent attempts by the Bush administration to peddle video news releases (VNRs) as independent coverage and having broadcast commentators on the government payroll have sullied the legitimate profession.**

The Pataki press office was the first to extensively use video to deliver the Administration's unfiltered message. A staff videographer was assigned and showed up at almost every gubernatorial event to record and then distribute picture and sound of the Governor to any willing TV station. To our knowledge, a scientific survey was never undertaken, but anecdotal reports from various New York TV markets indicated Pataki WAS getting more screen time. And the radio service was still there, but on line!

The New York State government communications saga over the past three decades provides a useful model in a discussion of contemporary government "flackery," and how initially earnest efforts to communicate as a government have been distorted. The recent attempts by the Bush Administration to peddle video news releases (VNRs) as independent coverage and having broadcast commentators on the government payroll have sullied the legitimate profession. John Pavlik's article "Disguised as News?" in the Spring 2006 issue of *Television Quarterly*, documents the pervasive influence of VNR's in TV news and sounds the alarm for news directors and reporters everywhere.

Every news director and desk editor and reporter I've known have instinctively regarded government communications as illegitimate and untrustworthy,

although there are many professional government communicators—of every political stripe—who have some measure of altruism and do their jobs with integrity.

"Don't ever lie to me," an AP reporter once said to me, "and I might believe what you say

is true." I never lied. I may have spun (although we didn't call it that then), but I never lied. "Spin doctors" try to guide reporters' impressions of their client's position or statement from a negative to a more positive view. Liars, on the other hand, simply peddle untruths. When government communications—in any medium—are a lie, an important bridge to the public is damaged or destroyed. Voters should know what their elected officials are saying and doing. But, reporters and editors, no matter how independent,

bring their personal experience to every story, which colors the message of the first person. As Tom Lewis, my speechwriter colleague in the Carey Press Office once observed, “Reporters’ hands aren’t clean either.”

“Print what he means, not what he says,” a flack for a less-than-articulate politician once admonished. In that case, the journalist’s job would be to not only discover what was meant. Inevitably, interpretation creeps in. That is when public trust in the profession is all the more important.

As the internet provides more and more information from more and more independent sources and as the younger demographic begins to prefer political satire (*The Daily Show*) to the nightly news programs, the challenge for the government communicator becomes even more interesting. The professional government communicators we call “flacks” (not a term of endearment among the press) can post their own unadulterated material on the web—in the “blogosphere”—and hope that it’s taken for gospel truth. On the other hand, they must counter misinformation or outright

lies about their client or program. Like any other effort to cut through the clutter, the government communicator can feel forced to sensationalize the message just to get it heard.

“Crooked politicians,” my father-in-law used to mutter, “never tell the truth.” If the government communicator has to start with an untruth, the popular belief that all politicians are crooks seems proven and justified.

It remains, however, that it is a government’s responsibility to communicate, using all media and professional practitioners to deliver its message.

We can hope, however, that government of, by and for the people might once again emerge out of a dark era that was revealed in Watergate and has persisted to the present. Things will change only if reporters are themselves diligent and honest and are supported by their editors. Things will change further if honest reporting keeps government communicators honest and exposes dishonesty when it is discovered.

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William Fortune Snyder is the Executive Director of the New York Network/SUNYSAT in Albany and served as a press officer to Governor Hugh L. Carey from 1977-82, concluding his appointment as Director of Communications. He is a Trustee of the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences (NATAS) and a Regional Vice President in the New York Chapter of NATAS.