

Nixon Says Briefing Uproar Is for Journalists to Solve

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President Nixon said yesterday that the current controversy over administration news policies, in which a number of newspapers have challenged the administration's practice of putting out information that cannot be attributed to any source, is "a problem for the journalistic community" to solve.

But journalists who sought to grapple with the problem yesterday got nowhere as a split developed between reporters who were satisfied with the status quo and those who were making an effort to pin down government officials who communicate with the press.

At a meeting of the State Department Correspondents' Association, a number of reporters were critical of the stand taken by The Washington Post, which has issued new guidelines instructing its staff to insist "through every means available" that government briefings be on the record.

A number of reporters expressed concern that this decision by The Post might deter the State Department from providing information it wished to volunteer.

While the background news conference—a form of government briefing in which the source of the information cannot be named—has long been a subject of controversy, the current debate grows out of the refusal by The Post and New York Times to abide by the not for attribution rule imposed on a briefing given Tuesday aboard Air Force One by National Security adviser Henry Kissinger.

The Correspondents' Association meeting yesterday was called to consider whether journalists could or should take any action on government information policies and was adjourned without taking any decision. At this meeting, however, the hour-long discussion was focused on the daily briefing given by a State Department spokesman and not on the whole range of government information policies.

These include "background briefings" in which the official cannot be named, or "deep background" conversations in which the source cannot be identified in any way.

In the State Department briefings, the spokesman occasionally goes "on background," meaning his remarks are for attribution to State Department officials and sometimes goes into a more gray area in which he provides information for "guidance."

The president of the State Department Correspondents' Association, James Anderson, of Westinghouse, informed members that department officials had told him it would now start to restrict access to the transcript of regular briefings to those reporters who agree to the rules that have been generally accepted.

Frank Starr of the Chicago Tribune proposed a resolution calling upon The Post to "abide by the rules generally recognized in the daily briefings after it has gone through the procedure of trying to change the ground rule on that point of information" Stan Carter of the New York Daily News proposed that the resolution refer only to members and not to The Washington Post.

A number of members urged that the association take no position that would place correspondents in the position of endorsing rules made by the government or of licensing access to news in the briefings. Murrey Marder, diplomatic reporter of The Washington Post, said it would be "unconscionable" for reporters themselves to limit access to news. The meeting took no decision.

In Key Biscayne, White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler renewed his criticism of The Post, rejecting the newspaper's contention that it had learned independently that it was Kissinger who gave the briefing on Air Force One. He also declined to comment either on the new guidelines issued to Post reporters or the orders from New York Times Managing Editor A. M. Rosenthal to his reporters to be "a lot more selective" about attending official backgrounders.

"This whole matter is not something occupying the President's time," Ziegler said. "We have, in this administration, more to do than get involved in the machinations of The Washington Post Co."

Ziegler said he had discussed the situation briefly with the President Thursday and said Mr. Nixon did not seem greatly concerned. He quoted the President as saying it was "a problem for the journalistic community," but added in passing that Mr. Nixon took the attitude that if news organizations didn't like the practice of backgrounders that was fine with him. "there would just be no backgrounders."