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Flynn's image in news media cultivated by selective access

By Steve Marantz
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Day or night, Boston's peripatetic mayor, Raymond L. Flynn, may be found in any of Boston's far-flung neighborhoods, inside coffee shops, fire stations and taverns, or on basketball courts tossing up feathery jump shots.

He may be in his City Hall office downtown or at the city-owned Parkman House on Beacon Hill. He may be in his South Boston home, or in the nation's capital, or on the West Coast. He may be in Ireland or Poland.

Wherever the mayor is, the reporters who attempt to cover him on a regular basis are unlikely to know. Much of the time Flynn's whereabouts are a mystery to those whose job it is to know where he is, and what he is doing.

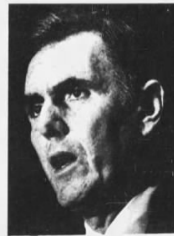
As a result, there is a Keystone Kops-like aspect to covering the mayor, some reporters say. At critical times, mayoral sightings can be like nine-alarm fires, setting off wild excursions through city traffic or madcap scrambles for the next flight out of Logan Airport.

"We don't know where he is 80 percent of the time," said Joe Sciacca, the Boston Herald's City Hall bureau chief. "People call us and tell us they saw the mayor here and they saw the mayor there. All I can say is, 'When, where, what did he say?' It's a little embarrassing."

No general news conferences

Flynn is one of the few big-city mayors who does not regularly provide the media with an advance copy of his daily schedule, and possibly the only one who does not announce all of his public appearances. In his 1 1/4 terms at City Hall, Flynn has never, in anybody's memory, scheduled a general news conference to address a range of questions.

Flynn's approach is to make himself available on his own terms, which entails taking questions on one or two topics, following public events that occur away from City Hall. But reporters are given no guarantee that Flynn will be avail-



MAYOR FLYNN
'Doing well on his terms'

able, and Flynn reserves the right to forgo questions, which he often does.

The mayor's selective availability is part of his administration's broader news management strategy, which involves tight centralized control of public information, playing news organizations off against one another to obtain favorable coverage, and the regular staging of events and announcements that portray the mayor in a positive light.

The administration's effort to manage news extends to telling reporters which questions they may ask the mayor. Press secretary Arthur Jones told the Globe recently that a request for an interview with the mayor would be granted on the condition that questions about only certain topics could be asked. The Globe declined.

Over the last few months, Flynn has been increasingly unpredictable about when and where he chooses to comment publicly. Administration sources say this is due largely to what has become the mayor's preoccupation with issues of crime, race and education, and an uncertainty as to how to deal with them.

Availability unpredictable

In the last week Flynn has made himself available repeatedly as he has vented his frustration over the city's crime problems. But even on the crime issue his availability has been unpredictable. In January, following the stabbing death of Northeastern student Mark Belmore, Flynn evaded reporters camped outside his City Hall office. Reporters had sought an explanation as to why police had withheld information on the murder for 36 hours, and why Flynn, in an interview with WEEI radio, had blamed the news media for the delay in reporting the murder.

One reporter tracked down Flynn at a South End groundbreaking last November, seeking comment on the impending school referendum. Before the event, Flynn waved off the reporter. To the crowd, Flynn announced he could not stay long because he had to visit a local school, an apparently unscheduled event.

After the event, Flynn entered his car as the reporter approached. His police driver backed the car the wrong way up a one-way street, forced one car off to the side of the road and drove off.

"He smoked me"

Boston Herald reporter David Weber, seeking a comment from Flynn the night Rep. Joseph Kennedy 2d withdrew his name as a potential gubernatorial candidate, chased his station wagon from a television station parking lot in Allston, through a red light onto Storrow Drive, to City Hall, and up onto the Central Artery. Weber lost Flynn on Interstate 93 northbound. "He smoked me," Weber said. "My little Mitsubishi was no match for his LTD."

Jones, in an interview, defended Flynn's practices in dealing with the media, saying that he is more accessible than his predecessor, Kevin White. He said Flynn often does interviews outside of his house when he leaves for work at 6:30 a.m., or he may sit with reporters in restaurants or while being driven in his station

wagon.

"It is inaccurate to say the media does not have access to the mayor - it would be a disservice to portray that particular notion to the public," Jones said. "Is his style the formal version? No. But it's certainly one that allows for that access."

Jones said the news media are not advanced Flynn's schedule because it changes so frequently, and because any last-minute changes might alert reporters to nonpublic business whose handling may require that it be kept out of the public eye. Jones noted that on many mornings reporters are informed of one or two of the mayor's public appearances for that day.

Raymond C. Dooley, Flynn's administrative services director who plays a key role in media strategy, said that City Hall reporters who complain about Flynn's accessibility are unhappy about having to leave the building and follow Flynn to the neighborhood events for comment. "For those who go to the events, it's very infrequent they come up with a 'no comment' or no response," Dooley said.

WEEI news editor Phil Sirkin said, "Sometimes they call us two minutes ahead of the event... I don't understand the rationale behind the lack of a daily schedule. It makes our job more difficult."

Sirkin said that he finds Flynn to be more accessible on a daily basis than Mayor White was but that White compensated by holding periodic news conferences that were wide open.

White's former press secretary, George Regan, recalled that White would sit down occasionally with the entire City Hall press corps and take all questions. But no matter how much White gave them, the reporters wanted more, Regan said.

Insatiable appetite for news

"A lot has to do with the relationship between the City Hall press and the press secretary," Regan said. "Arthur Jones is a very good press secretary. But the job is a no-winner. Because you've got to print every day, and this city has an insatiable appetite for news. The attitude is 'Don't tell me you gave me Kevin and Ray yesterday.'"

A Globe survey of six cities found that the mayors of New York, St. Louis, Atlanta, Chicago and Los Angeles release their entire public schedules to the media a day in advance if possible, and at the least, on the morning of the events. Of the mayors surveyed, only San Francisco's Art Agnos does not release a daily schedule in advance. But Agnos' press office releases his full schedule of public events to reporters requesting it on the morning of the events.

The mayoral offices contacted said that out-of-town travel is announced several days in advance. Flynn, on the other hand, often gives no more than a few hours' notice, as was the case prior to traveling to the West Coast to study crime-related issues last month. Both newspapers were alerted on a Saturday morning of Flynn's imminent afternoon departure, along with Police Commissioner Francis M. Roache.

Flynn's media style, combining elusiveness and selective availability, runs counter to a widely held perception of him as a publicity hound, a politician who will elbow the next person to get in front of a camera. Flynn fosters this perception by accommodating the print and electronic media on his pet issues.

But on issues that Flynn may consider uncomfortable, such as abortion or his political future, he is likely to, in the sporting argot, run for daylight. Up to now, at least, he has proven to be agile.

"Look at the amount of press he gets," said Martin Linsky, a specialist on press and public policy at the Kennedy School of Government. "It seems like he is doing well on his terms without going through the rituals of press conferences and advance schedules that most politicians have to do."

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