**Civics 101**

**Episode 2: White House Press Corps**

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:29] I'm Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101, the podcast refresher course on some basics you should have learned in high school U.S. history and government classes but may have forgotten. Each week throughout the first 100 days of the Trump administration we will answer one question like What does a chief of staff do? What is gerrymandering and what really happens when you call a member of Congress to register your opinion?

[00:00:53] Today we're looking at how power gets covered and reported from the White House press corps.

[00:00:58] Scott Horsley is our guide on the inside. He's NPR's senior White House correspondent and he's been on that beat since 2009, so he knows a thing or two about what goes on in the White House briefing room. Now while there's no specific call for a White House press corps in the constitution, freedom of the press to hold our elected officials accountable is a bedrock of our democracy. I asked Scott how he envisions his role as a White House correspondent.

**Scott Horsley:** [00:01:24] Well you're right. There is nothing in the Constitution that says that there ought to be 49 seats in close proximity to the Oval Office for D.C. based reporters. But right there in the First Amendment the founders were very much aware of the importance of a free press and the watchdog function that we play and we see our role as being the eyes and the ears of the American people who can't physically be there and don't have the time to be there in a watchdog role for themselves so we're there watching for all the people who want to know what the president and his team are up to.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:01:58] What's a typical day for a member of the White House press corps?

**Scott Horsley:** [00:02:02] Well there's no such thing as a typical day. Every day is different and certainly the opening days of any administration are particularly interesting and volatile and at some point that kind of opening frenzy will we hope settle down just a little bit. And then it's you know there's a rhythm of the president doing kind of public events where he's making a statement, meeting with people on camera, sort of trying to make a point through his persona. Then there are private closed door meetings sometimes with lawmakers sometimes with members of his cabinet to influence the direction of legislation or influence the direction of regulation.

[00:02:42] We've seen this president saying he wants to roll back regulations in a big way. We've seen him talk about trade in a way that's maybe at odds with members of his own party on Capitol Hill. So we're still sort of trying to sort out you know which of the statements that he made on the campaign trail in which the statements he's made in the White House are going to prove out.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:02] But you do show up like your colleagues every day at the White House press corps briefing?

**Scott Horsley:** [00:03:07] Well at NPR during the Obama administration we had three of us who covered the White House.

[00:03:12] We've we've upped that a little bit to have four of us covering the White House in the Trump administration. So not all of us show up every day. Maybe one of us will be there physically at the White House another one might be out in the country somewhere talking to voters one of us might be back at headquarters monitoring executive orders that the president's put out. So there's a lot to keep an eye on. But one of us is certainly there we are seat in the press room is not quite front but center we're in the second row center seat. So we're we're not quite a front row seat but a prominent seat to kind of watch the daily briefing.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:45] So at that daily briefing what don't we know or see that goes on?

**Scott Horsley:** [00:03:50] Well you can see it all I mean for better or worse the daily briefing at least ever since the Clinton administration has been on live television. Mike McCurry, the press secretary in the Clinton White House who allowed that to be a daily televised event has sometimes said that was his biggest mistake. And there are plenty of us I think who would agree because once they put it on camera for all the gains in transparency and civic education it unfortunately sort of turned the daily briefing into less of an exchange of information and the more of a kind of piece of performance art where you have a lot of the reporters and the press secretary kind of posturing for the TV cameras and the audience on on cable news or on C-SPAN.

[00:04:34] But what you don't know if you don't follow it regularly is just how little actual information is conveyed at those briefings. Typically in the Obama era, they ran about an hour and it was often sort of the least informative hour of my day. I might learn more making phone calls or reading position papers or talking to people behind the scenes. But what it is, it is an opportunity to get a spokesperson for the president on camera on tape saying something.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:05] There is criticism about the White House press briefing daily that there is no real news made there. I'm going to go further with critics saying it's a stenography pool at the White House press corps passing on whatever talking point the administration is on for the day. They're rarely covering real news. Now presidents have Twitter to get their message out. So what is your case Scott for why the White House press corps matters and is necessary?

**Scott Horsley:** [00:05:30] Yeah I mean there's a lot going on in that question as the press secretary himself might say. We do get critiqued for being stenographers, we don't see that as our role. On the other hand I sometimes get criticism that I don't do enough stenography.

[00:05:46] And it's interesting that the people who are making those criticisms have have changed a lot with the change of party in control of the White House. When Barack Obama was in the White House there were Democrats who thought I should maybe just pass on more of what the president and his staff said in an unfiltered way and more uncritically, while Republicans would complain that I didn't challenge them more. Now it's just the opposite in terms of the party that's doing the complaining, the party that wants more stenography.

[00:06:13] But our role is not simply to write down what the president or his spokespeople say and then pass it along unfiltered or or uncritically. It is to probe and to examine and to also hold it up to other pieces of evidence. You know if Sean Spicer comes out and says this is the largest crowd to ever witness a presidential inauguration in history period, it's our duty to say Well here are some other pieces of information that contradict that. In this case flatly disprove what the press secretary said.

[00:06:46] There are lots of cases that are not as black and white as that where you know the administration will argue that X Y Z has happened in the economy and you know you might say Well that is either because of or in spite of or partly because of and partly in spite of some action of the administration's taken. So it is part of our role is to certainly listen to what they have to say. Hear them out but also challenge, probe, and introduce other information to try to provide context, try to provide meaning.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:15] What kind of relationship do you want to have with the White House press secretary. Obviously you're trying to vet their information that they're putting out there and as you said you're there for the American people.

**Scott Horsley:** [00:07:26] Yes. And the relationship is necessarily adversarial, it's adversarial by design. We're not supposed to just be tools of the White House but on the other hand it doesn't have to be ugly it doesn't have to be hostile. It can be business like, we certainly had adversarial relations at times with the Obama administration. I spent part of that time serving on the Correspondents Association which is sort of the liaison between the working press and the White House and we certainly had complaints about usually restrictions on you know what press access might be to the to the president or his his aides or the terms under which information was distributed.

[00:08:05] We certainly had an adversarial relationship at times. It's the nature of the job that you're always pushing for more access. The White House staff is always sort of pushing to control their message. It has been somewhat more adversarial in the opening moments of the Trump administration. But we had some encouraging signals that during the first formal briefing on Monday that Sean Spicer understands that it's in no one's interest if we're just in open warfare. It doesn't help them to always be openly fighting with the press corps. It doesn't help us if we can't get information from the White House staff.

[00:08:43] You mentioned Donald Trump's Twitter feed. As technology has evolved presidents have had more of an opportunity to spread their message over the heads of or without going through the filter of the White House press corps. That's not absolutely new. You could say that Franklin Roosevelt's fireside chats were a way to reach out directly to the American people on the radio without having to go through the newspaper reporters who dominate the press corps at that time. Barack Obama was masterful in circumventing the White House press corps through the use of the White House Web site his own video news releases. And so what Donald Trump is doing with Twitter is different in degree maybe but it's not different in in substance.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:09:32] All right I've got a logistical question about the press briefing room. How does the seating work. Does an administration assign correspondents to certain seats or first come first serve?

**Scott Horsley:** [00:09:42] For most of the period that there has been a press room the White House staff has found it to their advantage not to assign the seats in the briefing room but to let the reporters themselves make that determination of how the seats would be assigned. Early in the Ronald Reagan administration Larry Speakes did do the seating assignment himself that was Reagan's press secretary but most press secretaries after that have decided it's better to let it let the reporters themselves decide how to allocate the seats. But if the Trump administration decides to shake that up they may try to do that, we'll see.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:15] Well as President elect Donald Trump did shoot down Jim Acosta the CNN reporter. If there are threats of being a victim or being chastised publicly by the president, is that going to have a chilling effect on the kinds of questions that White House correspondents ask in those briefings and in other situations with the press?

**Scott Horsley:** [00:10:39] Being excluded from a press conference would certainly have a chilling effect and the White House Correspondents Association has said that we would object strenuously if President Trump or any of his aides tried to exclude working reporters from either the briefing room or from you know presidential press conferences.

[00:10:59] Being ignored by the president, or even being chastised or belittled by the president won't necessarily have a chilling effect on the press corps. We're grownups we have thick skins. We're used to being berated by our by our listeners by our readers by the politicians we cover. So the fact that Donald Trump engaged in is sort of a shouting match with Jim Acosta of CNN, that was maybe more more visible than what we usually see in the decorus presidential press conferences or news conferences by a president elect. But that in itself I don't think will have a chilling effect.

[00:11:38] There have also been questions about you know how the rest of the press corps responded when then president elect Trump refused to take a question from Jim Acosta.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:11:47] Right, calls for solidarity, that everyone else should have asked the question that kind of thing.

**Scott Horsley:** [00:11:50] Some have suggested that we all should have asked asked Jim's question for him. I don't necessarily disagree with that. But as one of my colleagues Glenn Thrush formerly of Politico now with the New York Times pointed out Barack Obama always came to a press conference with a list of reporters that he planned to call on and he generally stuck to that list and other reporters could jump up and down and raise their hand and the president didn't call on them.

[00:12:17] He didn't make a scene of it the way that Donald Trump did in with Jim Acosta. But there was never some expectation that you know every reporter had a right to ask his question of the president or if denied that right that other reporters then have an obligation to ask that question for him or her. So it may it may at times be a useful strategy and we may occasionally adopt that strategy but it's always been the case that presidents call on some reporters and don't call on others.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:47] So Scott you are not an academic or civics scholar but as a practitioner what is the most important thing that people should know about the role of the White House press corps, the big takeaway?

**Scott Horsley:** [00:13:01] We are not here to influence the outcome of a debate or to play favorites or to help or hurt the president or his team or members of Congress.

[00:13:16] We're here to cover the news.