Pool Journalism

Pool journalism is a term describing several types of arrangements used by government officials to provide for broad media coverage of events that, for various reasons, can only be covered by a limited number of journalists. Pool arrangements are most commonly used when the number of journalists interested in covering an event is greater than the space available for accommodating them, as sometimes happens in coverage of the presidency. Under these circumstances, news organizations enter into voluntary pool arrangements in which a small number of journalists are deputized by their peers to cover the event on behalf of a large number of news organizations. These “pool” journalists cover the event on the condition that they share their notes, images, and news copy with all interested journalists unable to cover the event directly.

When used to cover routine governmental activities, pool journalism is typically seen by journalists as a necessary and desirable compromise that increases media access to newsworthy events by forgoing exclusive coverage. However, the use of pool journalism as a means of covering wars has been more controversial. Envisioned by Pentagon planners in the mid-1980s as a way to provide for media coverage of wars at short notice while maintaining operational security during the early stages of a military conflict, the first use of a national reporting pool to cover the 1990 invasion of Panama was a dismal failure, as pool journalists were not allowed to visit the scene of combat until late into the invasion. The most controversial use of reporting pools came during the 1990-1 Persian Gulf crisis, when pools were often used as the standard means of covering the conflict. Because these pools were given limited access to the theater of combat, they were widely seen outside the military as a means of controlling news coverage rather than facilitating it. Pools have been used in covering subsequent conflicts such as the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, but their use has been more limited and provisional as the military has shifted to new systems like embedded journalism for managing news coverage in time of war.


Word Count: 347 words

Signature line:

Scott L. Althaus

Associate Professor, Department of Political Science

Associate Professor, Department of Speech Communication

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

702 South Wright Street, Rm. 361

Urbana, IL 61801

salthaus@uiuc.edu