



Reporters scramble for convention coverage

by Catherine Siegner

Months before the Democratic National Convention opened in San Francisco, media from around the country and the world were jockeying for a prime spot from which to observe and record the proceedings within Moscone Center. Dozens of convention staff and hundreds of volunteers started screening media organizations for credentials back in January, and as July neared, the competition became fierce.

"Every small town paper, colleges, high schools—they all want credentials. I don't think there's a state that hasn't applied to us," said DNC staffer Deborah Campbell in mid-June. (Campbell was quoted in *Mediafile*, a publication of the Media Alliance in San Francisco.) She and her fellow workers expected to grant at least 12,000 credentials for the Moscone Center to a diverse mob of radio and TV reporters and camera people; newspapers; foreign journalists; film companies, and miscellaneous groups such as trade publications, newsletters, universities and video access crews. This meant a ratio of about three media persons for every one delegate.

After getting credentials and entering through numerous security checks into the inner sanctum of the Moscone Center, one found it was impossible to see what was going on and that the coveted credential really didn't mean much. Unless it was turned in for another category of pass—and there were several—it only allowed access to the periphery of the center where other media groups had curtained-off work areas; candidates' staffs had campaign headquarters, and commercial vendors hawked T-shirts, samples of mineral water and other items.

The most sought-after pass, the "Floor Pass," was limited to delegates and bigwigs, campaign staffers and media persons who were reporting from the floor or operating cameras stationed there. The three major TV networks had a massive three-story edifice near the podium with a 360-degree, eagle-eye view of the cavernous convention hall. From here, their anchors broadcast the evening news and interviewed movers and shakers. Other, lesser luminaries from the broadcast world had to content themselves with \$10,000-plus "sky boxes," 44 of which ringed the floor at the mezzanine level.

Networks were estimated to have paid as much as \$300,000 for outfitting these sky boxes with air-conditioning, carpeting, and production equipment.

Lowly newspaper reporters were assigned seats located where it was impossible to see the stage or podium except by watching huge TV screens that showed what was going on at the microphone. Because of this limited access, many people ended up watching C-SPAN, the cable network, from press centers either at the Moscone site, at the Hilton Hotel a few blocks away, or at the AT&T "media oasis" across the street. (This "oasis" had additional appeal in that, after showing only a press ID card, one could eat for free the gourmet meals brought in by caterers three times a day.)

There was an enormous number of events happening throughout each day of the convention, and it was nearly impossible to keep track of them all. At least three printed agendas of different types of events were available: the official podium action (when Mondale, Hart or Jackson would speak, etc.), the caucus meetings, and a roster of breakfast, lunch and dinner receptions and parties for candidates or other stars. This was not the end of the events list, however. Demonstrations continued throughout the four days across a massive parking lot from the convention center, and issue groups such as Central American peace activists and gay/lesbian organizations, along with many others, sponsored separate events in downtown San Francisco each day.

Except for the local San Francisco newspapers, *The Chronicle* and *The Examiner*, which covered every small detail of the convention, other large daily papers carried only the major news and/or rumors, and stories of their own state delegations.

Because TV crews had to be ready at an instant at any time, each network had at least 300 employees at the convention, and probably more. TV network executives have said since the convention it will be the last one so thoroughly covered by television. It could be argued they really didn't cover that much of this one either. Only C-SPAN, mentioned earlier, and the Pacifica Radio Network covered the stage events live. The TV networks used floor reporters and anchors ensconced in their sky boxes commenting on the action as "coverage."

Although no single group could possibly have been more wined and dined and lobbied than the delegates themselves, the media had its share of freebies and lobbyists wanting their view to come across to the public.

Along with the free food and drinks at the "media oasis," free parties put on by special interest groups lured reporters. Free copies of magazines and newspapers were available daily at the press centers, and several information kits were handed out—some so heavy with data they could hardly be carried around.

How much effect all this had on what a reporter sent back home or his or her station or newspaper is unknown. When asked why AT&T was spending so much money on free food, drinks and other amenities for media, a spokesman answered, "To show you what nice

people we are." One had a suspicion that wasn't the whole story.

The sheer number of media people was daunting. Most seemed to be middle-class journalists in their thirties. The majority were men, with about one-third women reporters. (Women reporters have had their revenge of sorts in covering the Ferraro campaign. For some reason, nearly all major news organizations have assigned women reporters to cover the vice-presidential nominee during her current campaigning. Interestingly, many Black reporters were assigned earlier to cover the Jesse Jackson campaign.)

Foreign media representatives had their own corner of a Hilton Hotel floor from which to phone stories to their outlets back home. Japanese TV and newspaper reporters shared space with British, Australian and French radio and newspaper journalists.

One revealing comment came from an East German wire service reporter who works out of Washington, D.C. He was baffled after a peace rally drew at least 40,000 people in a nearby parking lot while the convention continued inside the Moscone Center.

"Where is it really happening?" he asked, "out here or in there?"

Good question.



(Photo: Richard J. Brown)