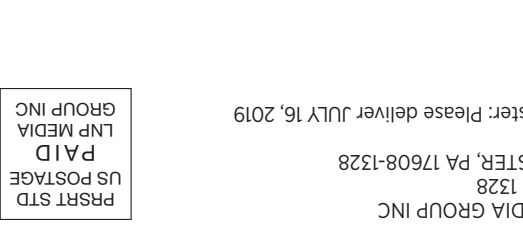
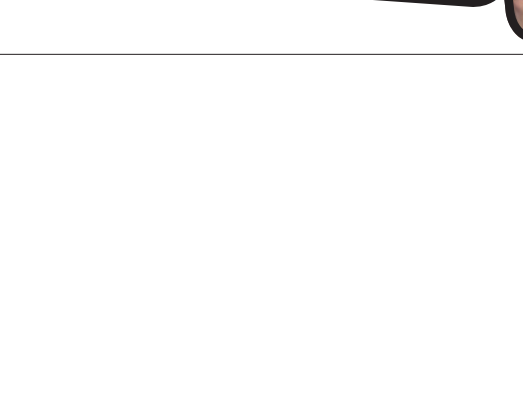




THE CAUCUS

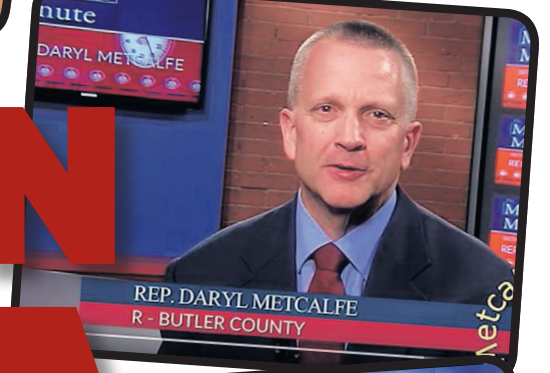
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STATE-RUN MEDIA

How much does all that Capitol flacking cost Pennsylvania taxpayers? It took us 3 months, but we have the answer.

COVER STORY » PAGE 6



OVERHEARD ON 3RD



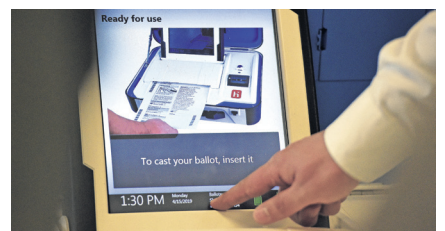
With a plan to sell bonds to raise money, Gov. Tom Wolf called an end run around the Legislature to pay for voting-machine upgrades. **PAGE 4**

THE INTERVIEW



George Wolff's 65-year career as a lobbyist began in the '50s, after his career as a trucker was derailed by a night in jail for a violation. **PAGE 5**

SPECIAL REPORT



With no federal regulation of voting equipment, states are left to police an industry that pays lip service to cybersecurity. **PAGE 10**

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Filling the Void

Lawmakers spend millions of taxpayer dollars to publish their own ‘news,’ as many media companies pull back on coverage

» SAN JANESCH

At first glance, it looks like any other TV news program. A title sequence unfolds with large, flashing graphics while eccentric stock music plays in the background. The scene opens in a small room, the walls a mix of dark blue, wood and artistic depictions of the Pennsylvania Capitol. Television monitors show the inside of the ornamental House chamber.

Legislators sit around a large oval desk in the center of the set. They stare into the teleprompters and welcome you to another edition of their “legislative report.”

In a building home to one of the largest, most expensive legislatures in the country, there are at least three of these television studios built to produce state-run, news-like programs for legislators.

Staff time, cameras, microphones, green screens and other broadcasting equipment used to keep them running add up to millions in taxpayer costs over the years — just one cog in a taxpayer-funded public relations machine that walks a fine line between official legislative business and campaigning.

The cost of all legislative communications is nearly \$10 million a year, on average, according to first-of-its-kind analysis of spending records from 2013 through 2018.

“That’s a pretty significant amount of money for a very defined function,” said Kyle Kopko, a professor of political science at Elizabethtown College. “I could see some taxpayers not being overly thrilled about that.”

With large budgets and about 130 staffers at their disposal, each of the four legislative caucuses essentially operates its own public relations firm.

Pennsylvania taxpayers pick up the tab for videos of legislators touring small businesses and for television-quality shows produced in studios built within the Capitol. They pay for thousands of newsletters and news releases, for telephone town halls, website design and programs that alert staff when legislators are

mentioned in the news.

Some of these expenses occur at all levels of state government. Gov. Tom Wolf’s executive budget included \$26.7 million in money designated for public communications, including almost \$1 million for his office.

And for the legislators and the staff who support them, there’s a simple justification to do as much of this as possible.

“People tell us that they want to be more connected with government, and we’re trying on our end to provide those services,” said Drew Crompton, chief of staff to Senate President Pro Tempore Joe Scarnati. “To what degree do they really want to be connected with government? I don’t know. But we think it’s important to send out as much information as someone would view.”

It’s certainly vital that citizens know what their elected officials are up to and what they’re thinking, to feel like they can participate in the process.

But in a media landscape in which the number of journalists covering state government has been shrinking, observers encourage citizens to think critically about the political communications that arrive in their inboxes unfiltered by any critical eye.

“Elected officials have a legitimate interest in communicating with the public,” said Ethan Porter, a George Washington University assistant professor of political communications. “Obviously, this legitimate interest can quickly be used to further their political, electoral interests.”



BY THE NUMBERS

A look at miscellaneous expenses involving Capitol communications.

\$1,939,206

Cost of broadcasting equipment — including cameras, tripods, monitors, virtual studio technology, extended warranties and more — among all four caucuses.

\$157,400

Per-session contracts between the Senate and Labels & Lists Inc., which puts together a database of constituent information, some of which is used for direct constituent contact.



COVER STORY

IN THE STUDIO

There are several broadcast studios in the Capitol.

One is run by the Capitol Media Center and is made available to lawmakers, administration officials and advocates. The Capitol Media Center is run by Capitol Media Services, with a budget of \$4.7 million in the 2018-19 fiscal year, according to documents obtained through a Right-to-Know Law request.

And then there are the studios run by lawmakers themselves. There's one for Senate Republicans and Democrats to share, and one each for the House Republicans and Democrats.

What are they broadcasting?

It depends on who's behind the desks and what time of year it is. Spring and summer shows might discuss what's happening with the state budget. Republicans might highlight workforce development efforts. Maybe Democrats put together a segment about raising the minimum wage.

"This is a special alert," Republican Rep. Daryl Metcalfe said at the outset of one of his recent "Metcalfe Minute" videos, a recurring segment featuring speed-reading that always comes out to a tight 60 seconds. This particular episode was about a resolution Metcalfe had introduced to impeach Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto because of his local gun-control ordinance.

"We must stand together and build a wall of freedom against the Pelosi, Peduto and Wolf attacks to criminalize the constitutional right of law-abiding firearm owners," Metcalfe said in the video, which got 990 views on YouTube at the time of this publishing.

The equipment used to put together these government-run "news" reports makes up some of the largest chunks of the General Assembly's communications budgets.

Individual pieces of equipment — from cameras and audio technology to software and hardware used to make green screens work — cost up to tens of thousands of dollars each, records show.

House Republican Caucus spokesman Mike Straub said the studio is a useful tool for putting together 30-minute legislative reports or quick on-screen reactions to whatever's happening in the Capitol.

"It's not a sound stage in Hollywood with a staff devoted to it 24 hours a day," he said.

Studio technology upgrades were among \$512,398 that House Republicans spent on broadcasting equipment in 2012 and 2013 with one Norristown-based company, Lerro Corp. Straub said the upgrades were "necessary at the time to keep up with modern media changes."

"I don't think a member says, 'I want to run for office because I want to host a TV show,'" Straub said.

House Democratic Caucus spokesman Bill Patton said his caucus spent \$240,000 in early 2013 to mostly replace old equipment and buy the latest high-definition cameras.

They're the ones used for news conferences, hallway interviews and caucus events in the Capitol Media

THE COST OF COMMUNICATING

The General Assembly's four legislative caucuses spend nearly \$10 million, on average, every year for communications, spending records show. Here are some of their largest expenses. The numbers are totals for the years 2013 through 2018.

COMMUNICATIONS STAFF COMPENSATION

» House Republicans: \$15,125,471

» House Democrats: \$10,691,336

» Senate Democrats: \$8,980,510

» Senate Republicans: \$8,753,928

NEWSLETTER EXPENSES

» House Republicans: \$3,046,518

» House Democrats: \$2,154,751

» Senate Democrats: \$781,264

» Senate Republicans: \$283,413

TELEPHONE TOWN HALLS

» House Republicans: \$801,541

» Senate Republicans: \$376,290

» Senate Democrats: \$370,933

» House Democrats: \$95,856

COMMUNICATIONS STAFF TRAVEL, LODGING AND MEALS

» Senate Democrats: \$171,864

» Senate Republicans: \$111,622

» House Democrats: \$87,180

» House Republicans: \$74,270

Center. House Democrats usually bring their own equipment so they can get back to the office, edit and post the video as quickly as possible and in the format they want, said Mike Herzing, the House Democrats' communications director.

The Senate spent \$570,727 on broadcast equipment in recent years, mostly in early 2015. Crompton described the thought process as a constant cost-benefit analysis where they "wrestle with how big the universe is that's watching."

"We keep restrictions on this, but we also understand you can't use a Polaroid to take pictures anymore," Crompton said.

TV TIME

The caucuses spent hundreds of thousands of dollars more on photo and video-related equipment — cameras, tripods, memory cards, speakers, microphones and editing software.

A GoPro Hero 6 camera with accessories cost the House Democrats \$505 in June 2018. Four camera lenses cost the Senate \$5,510 in December.

The House occasionally drops \$5,000 for stock photos in the House and has spent \$100,000 for livestreaming services since mid-2016. The Senate spends \$64,800 a year on closed-captioning service. The expenses add up.

One of the standout purchases was the Senate Democrats' \$120,000 air-time purchase. Every Sunday at 8 p.m., in most markets, "Capitol Connection" features clips from news conferences, events and hearings held by the Democratic caucus.

A late-June show opened with an intro from Minority Leader Jay Costa and then showed footage of a March rally on pipeline safety and April speeches on the Senate floor honoring the Tree of Life shooting victims.

In between the segments, two of the caucus' communications staffers appeared behind a desk in the studio, taking on the role of news anchors to introduce the next topic.

"Senate Democrats have once again introduced legislation to abolish the statute of limitations for sexual assault victims," said anchor Don Rooney, omitting the fact that Senate Republicans also have introduced and voted in favor of such reforms.

At the end of the half-hour show, the broadcast starts all over.

Brittany Crampsie, a press secretary for the Senate Democratic Caucus, said the air time is used to "communicate legislative updates, PSA information, what's happening in the district and decisions being made in Harrisburg."

They're not alone in getting their programming on cable, but they appear to be alone in paying for it.

Straub said House Republicans don't pay to have their "Legislative Reports" appear in the OnDemand menus for Comcast and other cable providers. Crompton said some Senate Republicans used to appear on cable but he couldn't recall buying air time like the Senate Democratic Caucus.

IN THE FIELD

Outside the studio, lawmakers are having a field day with their content. Videos show up on their legislative websites and social media accounts.

The communications staff films them speaking about bills and hot topics in Harrisburg. But they also travel all across the state to cover events such as senior expos and committee hearings.

Some videos show montages of lawmakers wearing hardhats in factories or sitting down with veterans — similar to campaign commercials that flood the airwaves every election season.

Video crews have routinely covered the Farm Show, producing dozens of videos, including a 2018 series starring then-Majority Whip Bryan Cutler interviewing children.

In the Senate last year, communications staff racked up nearly \$5,000 in expenses to film Minority Leader Jay Costa's "In the 43rd" series in which he visits local businesses in his Pittsburgh district.

Another \$2,094 in Senate Democratic Caucus expenses went toward filming an "activist boot camp" organized by state Sen. Daylin Leach, who was a candidate for Congress at the time.

The Senate described another event as "a discussion about uniting liberals around shared goals." The tagline for the event — "Because this isn't normal" — referred to President Donald Trump. And in his opening remarks, Leach criticized Trump's health care decisions and

referred to Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch as "a jerk."

Leach insisted that "Goodstock 2017" wasn't a political event. His spokesman said liberals and conservatives attended, along with libertarians, socialists, independents "and at least one anarchist."

"'Liberalism' is not partisan. Neither is 'conservatism,'" said the spokesman, Zak Pyzik. "They are ideologies, not parties, and both were mentioned frequently during the event's many panels and speeches. Goodstock had nothing to do with voting a certain way. It was about engagement, issue advocacy, leadership and a passion about issues, not about political parties."

Some legislative communications might be "political advertising masquerading" as public interest, said Porter, the political communications professor. But "so much depends on the specifics of the content."

"There's a fine line between revving up constituents to support specific policies that elected officials propose and electioneering communications," said Kopko, of Elizabethtown College.

It's also a natural incumbency advantage, building name recognition for the legislator and thus indirectly providing "an electoral effect," even if it isn't intended that way, Kopko said.

The costs of covering in-district events include travel, lodging and meal expenses.

Senate Democrats have spent the most per year on average, with \$28,644 in such costs; their Republican counterparts spent \$18,604 per year. In the much larger House caucuses, these costs were less: \$12,378 per year on average for Republicans and \$14,530 for Democrats.

The House Democratic and Republican caucuses each rent their own vans to haul equipment and communications staffers to events at a cost of \$544 per month.

Spokespeople in each of the four caucuses said there's no limit to the number of events a legislator can have covered by a caucus photographer or videographer. They said staffers' expenses will be approved as long as the event was for a "purely legislative purpose," and several indicated there has been little or no cause for concern with lawmakers abusing those options.

"Our staff would only go to a member's district if completely necessary," Straub said. "Communications staff attend events as needed, and just like any other line of work, some expenses are reimbursed as needed."

Some members do more than others, but all staff travel is decided on a case-by-case basis, Straub said.

Crompton said the Senate expenses are processed through the chief clerk, and his office has "gotten involved from time to time" if they believe a senator is using any office "to an unrealistic level."

"It takes new members a little time to understand how many events they should be having and costs for people driving out and possibly staying over," Crompton said. "We keep those expenses to a minimum ... If we see that there is some sort of lopsided nature to a member, we'll communicate to a

\$249,586

Senate Republican Caucus expenses to overhaul its main website and the sites for all GOP senators in 2016-18.

\$12,000

House Republican Caucus expenses to redesign its website. A spokesman said the caucus paid for one site, and staffers in-house have been slowly re-creating it for all 110 GOP House members.

\$105,000

One-time cost for House Democrats to audit their own communications staffing needs and messaging techniques, in 2017.



COVER STORY

member that perhaps they're overburdening or disproportionately utilizing (that office)."

Patton and Herzing expressed a similar sentiment, adding that they couldn't remember the last time an expense was denied because it wasn't for a "legislative purpose."

STAFF

The largest expense in communication is obviously personnel. In nearly every caucus, there are staffers designated as videographers and photographers, broadcast specialists and graphic artists. Some titles are specific to certain caucuses, like Senate Democrats' social media director or House Democrats' "director of digital media and analytics."

There are 51 House Republican communications staffers, 42 for House Democrats, 19 for Senate Republicans and 18 for Senate Democrats.

George Wolff, a former lobbyist, called the staff size and cost "absolutely startling." Wolff, 87, started lobbying at the Capitol in 1953 when rank-and-file lawmakers didn't have offices and shared secretaries from a pool when they needed letters written.

Most staffers in the larger House caucuses are considered communications or media specialists. They're the ones handling the majority of work on websites, social media, event planning, newsletters and news releases.

Patton said media specialists spend much of their time tweeting and posting on Facebook and YouTube for their members.

Straub said his boss, House Majority Leader Bryan Cutler, manages his own Twitter account; Straub manages the Facebook page. Some of the 110 House GOP members will volunteer for and talk on their own local radio shows. Others won't talk at all to the media unless their communications staffer is there, Straub said.

"It's been a dawning realization for the last decade that things are changing," Patton said, emphasizing the increased role of social media and the decline in traditional news coverage of the Capitol.

CONNECTING WITH THE MASSES

To communicate directly with constituents on a massive scale, lawmakers turn to newsletters, telephone town halls and their websites.

E-newsletters have become more popular, but traditional print newsletters still carry a hefty mailing cost to the tune of about \$1 million per year for all four caucuses.

Records show lawmakers send out newsletters sporadically — until election year comes.

In nonelection years, House Republicans spend an average of \$361,879 on newsletters, an analysis of three years' worth of data shows. In election years, they spend about \$651,085. House Democrats spend an average of \$207,381 in nonelection years and \$510,869 in election years, the analysis found.

"There's a couple ways to look at that," said Patton, of the House Democrats. "One can argue it's a political function. You can also say it's a two-year legislative cycle."

More legislative activity typically happens in that second year, giving members more to talk to constituents about, he said. The other spokespeople, when asked about the jump, attributed it to members deciding how and when to send their own newsletters.

The same election-year spike isn't true for telephone town halls. Senate Democrats and Republicans each spend about \$125,000 per year, and House Republicans spend about \$100,000 annually, according to the contracts.

Expenses provided through the open records requests show "iTown Hall" meetings for Republican and Democratic senators cost about \$2,000 to \$3,500 each.

Straub said telephone town halls are popular among the House GOP, which spent about \$800,000 on

HIGHEST PAID

Here's a look at who made what among communications staffers earning more than \$90,000 in 2018.

HOUSE DEMOCRATS

- » **Bill Patton**, press secretary: **\$110,786**
- » **Michael Herzing**, communications director: **\$106,106**
- » **Barbara Gill**, regional communications director, southeast Pennsylvania and Philadelphia: **\$102,492**
- » **Thomas Andrews**, team manager, northeast Pennsylvania: **\$101,400**
- » **Robert Caton**, senior manager, social media: **\$95,030**
- » **Mark Shade**, communications director: **\$91,988**

HOUSE REPUBLICANS

- » **Steve Miskin**, press secretary: **\$135,018**
- » **John Dille**, communications supervisor: **\$96,434**

SENATE REPUBLICANS

- » **Carolyn Milligan**, director: **\$136,950**
- » **Jenn Kocher**, press secretary: **\$125,090**
- » **Gregory Milligan**, director of video services: **\$98,299**
- » **Ronald Moore**, writer: **\$93,435**
- » **Christopher Judd**, writer: **\$92,194**

SENATE DEMOCRATS

- » **Hugh Baird**, communications and issues development director: **\$158,578**
- » **Charles Tocci**, press director: **\$103,186**
- » **Danielle Prokopchak**, director of broadcasting: **\$95,659**
- » **Eric Smith**, broadcast specialist: **\$95,544**
- » **Brittany Crampsie**, press secretary: **\$94,000**
- » **James Kurish**, press secretary: **\$90,000**

HOW WE REPORTED THIS STORY

The Caucus obtained nearly 1,200 pages of spending and salary records from the four legislative caucuses and reviewed hundreds of additional documents using public databases, including the Pennsylvania Treasury. It also conducted numerous interviews with state officials. The analysis of communications spending in the Capitol took about three months.

them from 2013 through 2018. They serve as another "valuable tool" to give members a "direct line to constituents," he said.

Patton, whose House Democratic caucus spent a fraction of what the GOP did — just \$96,000 — said they're becoming more popular as word spreads about how much some members enjoy them.

"Most members didn't know what a telephone town hall was all about five years ago," Patton said. Typically they'll get around 300 to 400 people to stay on the line the entire time, Patton said.

SELF-EVALUATION

Pennsylvania's taxpayer-funded public relations bonanza doesn't start and end with what constituents see in their local newspapers, on television, in their mailboxes or online.

Behind the scenes, the communications teams spend thousands to monitor their members' own media coverage and, in one case, undertake a comprehensive audit of communications strategy.

The audit, with a \$105,000 price tag, was for House Democrats in 2017. Global Strategy Group, a New York-based firm, set out to evaluate the current structure of the team, the effectiveness of its messaging and the Pennsylvania media landscape.

Patton said there were two "inspirations" for the audit: the new digital and social media-driven nature of communications and a 2016 Right-to-Know Law request by The Caucus that revealed House Democrats' communications staff was half of what their Republican counterpart's was. At the time, the Democrats had 26 communications staffers and the Republicans had 51, Patton said.

The audit recommended more staff and a heightened focus on social media and digital operations, Patton said. They increased their staff complement to its current 42, partly as a result of the audit and partly in anticipation of having more Democratic House members to work for, Patton said.

"We could tell we were going to do well in the 2018 elections," he said, noting there were 26 freshmen House Democrats this year.

The audit isn't the only instance of using taxpayer money for self-evaluation.

Senate Democrats have spent \$37,000 over the study period on Critical Mention, a media-monitoring service that collects news stories, television and radio clips whenever one of their members is mentioned in the news.

A demo video on the company's website explains how the program delivers instant notifications when "clients, competitors or key search terms" are mentioned online, in social media, on television and on the radio.

When asked whether Senate Democrats have it programmed to alert them when only their members are mentioned — or whether it filters out political and campaign news — Crampsie said, "The service simply runs a keyword search for relevant news."

House Republican expenses show they also spent \$3,600 in both 2016 and 2017 for Critical Mention, though no contracts have been posted on the Treasury website. Straub said the caucus still uses it, and it's an "important tool for tracking" House Republicans in the news.

He said it was a popular program for PR professionals, but he hadn't used it since he came on the job in January. He instead uses Google Alerts, a similar but free option.

CHANGING MEDIA LANDSCAPE

In the days before website subscriptions and digital newspaper replicas, staffers in the House Democrats' communications office would see their hands turn black, covered in inky newspaper print as they browsed all the hard-copy papers.

The daily routine included clipping out the state stories, photocopying them onto different pages and distributing the pages to the members, said Patton, who started with the caucus communications office in 1989.

Now, news consumption has completely transformed, and the news industry along with it.

According to a recent report, news organizations have already lost 3,000 jobs in 2019, their worst year since nearly 8,000 were laid off in the first five months of 2009. Public relations has filled the void. There were 6.4 public relations specialists for every one reporter in 2018, up from a roughly two-to-one ratio 20 years earlier, according to a Bloomberg report on U.S. Census data.

Spokespeople in the Capitol say their public relations changes reflect this reality. The number of reporters covering state government has dwindled — both from within Harrisburg and across the state.

"The media landscape continues to change," said Straub, who was a television reporter covering the Capitol for WGAL until earlier this year. "So, members are doing more to reach out and keep their constituents informed of what is happening in Harrisburg and how it impacts their districts."

Patton said the changes have been part of the reason for their increase in staffing, saying, "It may be up to us to get that message out."

How, exactly, they continue to get that message out is going to be the big — and possibly costly — question.

Crompton, in an interview in late June, said he got an "engaging" email that day from a company that said it could use artificial intelligence to handle the Senate's constituent response.

"I'm not quite sure I want computer programs to write responses to constituent letters or press releases or anything in that genre," he said. "But maybe in 10 years artificial intelligence will be a new form." ☹

\$35,000

Annual expense by Senate Democrats to reserve one hour of air time on a Comcast cable access channel every week.

\$13,000

Annual expense by Senate Democrats for Critical Mention, a media-monitoring program that sends them stories, television and radio clips that mention their members.

\$10,000

House Republican Caucus' annual contract for a service that "facilitates mass distribution" of news releases through email and fax.