



Capturing the recent history of public affairs occupational culture: A comparative case study on the image of lobbying in the early 21st century



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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the narrative structures of two audiovisual products from the point of view of public relations cinematic discourse: the documentary *State Legislature*, directed by Frederick Wiseman, and the TV series *K Street*, created and directed by Steven Soderbergh. Both productions capture the activity of lobbyists in the state and federal governmental arenas, are remarkable ethnographic exercises in analyzing the practice of lobbying in the United States and major examples of the media representation of corporate public affairs. Accordingly, *State Legislature* and *K Street* are key sources of the recent history of public relations occupational culture.

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1. Introduction

In one of the most celebrated historiography books of recent years, *The Mirror of Herodotus* (2009), a current member of *Annales* French historiographical movement, François Hartog, asks whether Herodotus is to be regarded as an ethnographer or a historian. In fact, to Herodotus—a Greek historian from the 5th century BC, and considered the first historian ever—a historian is not a compiler of old documents, but a researcher who travels to form an opinion and collect testimonies regarding the recent past (Hartog, 2009). As other scholars have argued, “the Father of History is also the father of comparative anthropology” (Pipes, 1999), “the father of ethnography” (Jones, 1996, p. 315).

This stance on history was adopted by other historians from classical antiquity, such as Thucydides, who used oral surveys to collect data for his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and by historians from the Middle Ages (Guenée, 1980) or the Enlightenment, like Voltaire (Soulet, 2012). Although it was Voltaire who said: “Over time, stories grow and the truth is lost” (quoted in Soulet, 2012, p. 14), from the nineteenth century onwards historiographical trends dealt more with the earliest times than the present.

However, it was the great psychological impact of the Second World War that triggered the boom in research into Recent history (also known as History of the Present or Contemporary History; in French: *Histoire immédiate*), a term coined by the French historian Jean-François Soulet (1994) to refer to the historiography of the present world.

Recent history arises through the dividing of contemporary history, inevitably expanded by the passage of time (Soulet, 1994). Through the use of words explicitly linked to the present and the immediate, historians insist on making the most

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recent events their object of study, meaning it is an object under permanent construction (Hobsbawm, 1996). Unlike journalism, which is also concerned with narrating current events, recent history applies the methodology of historical science (Soulet, 2012). The problem that can most easily affect the historian of recent history is a lack of objectivity; although objectivity is not fully achieved in the history of bygone eras, either.

The other crucial factor in the development of recent history, however, was the mass media revolution, which affected sources of information, both through their sudden multiplication and the different media and channels via which information might appear. Compared with the shortage of sources suffered by the classical historian, the recent historian has them in abundance. And this thanks the audiovisual documents that involved similar innovations in using the sources themselves. Although fictional cinema is also considered a source of recent history (Soulet, 2012), documentary film is the most accurate, since “the present and the will to make it history place the protagonists’ own testimony at the service of the historian” (Capellán, 2001, p. 296). The result is therefore recent history, a historiographical project that seeks to provide a response to the technological revolution, the emergence of the mass media, and the new historical consciousness that arose in twentieth century societies.

Although the history of public relations and its various professional fields, such as corporate public affairs and lobbying, is a recent one, the profession has not received intense coverage in film (Ames, 2010; Kinsky, 2011; Miller, 1999), and when this has happened, it has not always been positive (Ames, 2010; Lee, 2001, 2009). Furthermore, in the field of television, perhaps only Aaron Sorkin’s *The West Wing* (1999–2006) and *The Newsroom* (2013) tackle professional aspects of political public relations and media relations (Smudde & Luecke, 2005). However, in the first decade of this century, lobbying—“an area of public relations that is challenging, rewarding and intrinsically worthwhile” (Gregory, 2007, p. XIV)—has had more luck in arousing the interest of American producers and filmmakers. In fact, some notable classic Hollywood movies addressed the theme of political influence, such as Frank Capra’s *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). Lobbyists have also been the central characters in recent fictions such as Jason Reitman’s *Thank You for Smoking* (2005), George Hickenlooper’s *Casino Jack* (2010)—a comical portrayal of lobbyist Jack Abramoff—, and even *The West Wing* shows lobbyist strategies toward the White House. Nevertheless, it is two big-name directors, documentary maker Frederick Wiseman and Oscar-winning director Steven Soderbergh, who have been responsible for the two most important testimonies of the current practice of lobbying, one through a documentary and the other a TV series.

The purpose of this article is to analyze how Frederick Wiseman’s documentary *State Legislature* and Steven Soderbergh’s television series *K Street* constitute two important sources of knowledge regarding the practice of public affairs. Both are prime examples of media representations of public relations practice while constituting ethnographic and historiographical models of said professional practice.

2. Frederick Wiseman’s *State Legislature*

State Legislature, a three-hour and 37 min documentary, is one of the last films created by Frederick Wiseman, a producer/director who has spent most of his long, respected career recording everyday life in a wide variety of American public institutions—including mental hospitals, high schools, welfare institutions, juvenile courts, and, with this documentary, parliamentary branch.

State Legislature shows the day-to-day activities of the Idaho Legislature, including committee meetings, debates of the House and Senate, informal discussions, meetings with lobbyists, constituents, the public and the press. As Darmon (2013) suggests, the workings of a democratic government are of interest not only to Americans; because so many countries in the world are currently trying to adopt a democratic form of government, the issues presented have relevance on a global scale.

Frederick Wiseman—“perhaps de most sagacious of American documentarists” (Saunders, 2007, p. 188)—has made 34 other documentaries, including the controversial *Titicut Follies* in 1967, which examined life in a Massachusetts hospital for the criminally insane. His films have explored American life and institutions such as high school, horse racing, law and order, and domestic violence. “The film shows how the democratic decision-making process works” (Wiseman, 2007, p. 153). The Idaho Legislature consists of the upper Idaho Senate and the lower Idaho House of Representatives. The Idaho Senate contains 35 Senators, who are elected from 35 districts. The Idaho House of Representatives consists of 70 representatives, who are elected from the same 35 legislative districts, with 2 being elected from each constituency. There are no term limits for either chamber.

Why Idaho? According to Wiseman (2007), Idaho is a western state with a relatively small population, vast natural resources, great beauty, and a complex and fascinating history. The issues that are of importance to Idaho are similar to those of many western states (i.e. development of natural resources, tourism, increasing the industrial base, preserving the integrity of the environment, and maintaining a rural way of life hospitable to its residents). All of these factors are reflected in the issues that the legislature deals with during a legislative session.

Wiseman presents several issues at various stages in the legislative process. His camera is present at committee meetings, debates on the floor, lunch conversations, and even backroom meetings with lobbyists (the film has major sequences illustrating the role of lobbyists). His camera watches as legislators grapple with issues as diverse as water usage, teachers’ salaries, drivers licenses for immigrants, telephone deregulation, gay marriage, contractor licensing, and the building of an American history monument.

The film was shot during the 2004 session of the Idaho legislature. Wiseman was present, with the exception of a few days, for the entire session, and he had access to all aspects of their work—“The people in the Idaho legislature were extremely

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