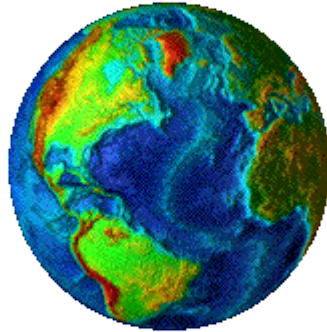


**The Global
Communicator's
Welcome to
Washington Guide**

Ed Barks

Dedicated to the legion of global communicators who arrive in Washington to share their cultures, commerce, and camaraderie.



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Author's Note

One area of consensus became clear as I conducted research for this paper. During interview after interview with non-U.S. communicators posted to Washington, D.C., there was agreement that few reliable resources exist to help them adjust to life and work in America's capital city.

While there may be a handful of organizations and publications that can help in certain areas, a one-stop source of information appears to be lacking.

Some of the experts I interviewed — individuals who know firsthand the rigors of arriving for a post in Washington — exhibited a sense of frustration. Some a sense of resignation. And some an emphatic sense of irritation.

Thus, the genesis of this paper you now hold in your hands. It is an attempt to come to the aid of those who touch down at Washington's Dulles International Airport only to be confronted by a strange city, culture, and work environment. Worse yet, you may have no one to guide you.

It must be said this paper may not be as helpful as originally intended. That has been no little source of professional disappointment for me. Given the lack of readily accessible resources, the sad truth is you may need to create a do-it-yourself plan. Nonetheless, my hope is that this document will at the least provide you with some ideas for a framework to acclimate you to your new life in Washington.

So much for the bad news. Now let's look on the bright side. You have the power to aid future international communicators trying to find their way in Washington. This resource is intended to be a living document, one that you can help to improve. The content will gain value over time if readers like you contribute suggestions for publication in subsequent editions. I heartily encourage you to do so, with ideas large and seemingly small.

An additional note of clarification: Throughout this work the term "communicator" is used frequently. This word refers to those engaged in fields such as public affairs, public relations, government relations, and investor relations — in other words, those individuals whose job it is to communicate with the outside world on behalf of their organizations.

Welcome to Washington, D.C.

Imagine yourself plunked down in a foreign country. You've never been there before. You've had only a quick and hasty course explaining the new country's culture and style. Worst of all, you don't know anyone who can help guide you.

It's not so unimaginable for the diplomats and global communicators — such as press attachés and public affairs officers — who have been posted to corporate offices, embassies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Washington, D.C. In fact, it happens routinely.

If you match the description above, welcome to the USA. This paper is for you and for the Americans who can help you adjust to your new life in the States.

New Job, New Culture, New Challenge

There is pressure to perform immediately in any new job. Being a press officer for a non-U.S. corporation or government is no exception.

Your new life likely features a challenging job transition coupled with the need to learn the ways of a new land. What types of individuals should you forge relationships with as you settle into your new professional life?

- **Journalists** who report on issues of interest to you and your organization.
- **Fellow communicators** — public affairs executives, press attachés, and communications strategy experts — who can serve as guides to the American media.
- **Compatriots** from your country who are also based in the U.S.

On the professional level, the number one trial for many newly arrived communications and public affairs officers is determining where to find the right journalists and how to meet them. As with any profession, the burden falls upon you to seek out opportunities for building professional relationships with these members of the media. Where to start?

Hello, My Name Is...

The most obvious step for solidifying bonds with reporters is the direct approach. Write, call, or contact via digital media reporters who cover the diplomatic beat at major newspapers like *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal* and introduce yourself as a resource for them and to gain their insights. You may find a similar move worthwhile with media outlets like the [*Washington Diplomat*](#).

There is no question that you will need to cope with personal as well as professional trials. Even if your native tongue is English, the U.S. celebrates unique values and traditions. This means that international communicators must deal with not only the business pressures of navigating the American media, they must also determine answers to such questions as:

- “Why do all businesses, government offices, and schools close on the Fourth of July?” That’s U.S. Independence Day.
- “Why do Americans insist on referring to football as soccer?” There is a separate and unfathomably popular American sport also called football.
- “How can 32 degrees be considered cold? Where I come from, that is a hot summer day.” Blame it on the difference between the Fahrenheit and Celsius scales.
- “What do all those strange idiomatic expressions mean?” Don’t take it literally when someone says there is more than one way to skin a cat.

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Another cultural variation: It is important to realize that how one strikes up conversations in America may differ from other cultures across the globe. In many other countries, the level of eye contact is fairly low and conversations begin on an aloof, deferential note. If this is your first posting to Washington, be prepared. Americans tend to be more boisterous and openly friendly at first (of course, there are exceptions to this rule, and the U.S. certainly has its share of introverts; many of them, however, have learned — or perhaps been forced — to adopt at least somewhat the outgoing personality considered dominant here).

On the other hand, Americans may seem physically distant due to a tradition of more personal space. Many other cultures feature close proximity and touching during conversation. Try to crowd an American or touch them upon a first meeting and you are likely to get a frosty reaction.

Of course, much of one’s preparation for a Washington posting should take place beforehand. Read about the U.S. before arriving. Talk to others who have lived or visited. And don’t focus only on your upcoming job. Get a handle on the entire lifestyle from popular culture to the educational system, transportation to dining habits.

It’s All About Relationships

The recommended course for new arrivals? Building relationships. These connections don’t necessarily need to be exclusively with reporters. Interacting with individuals who have contacts in the journalism community can also prove helpful.

Consider pursuing and developing professional connections with experts in such areas as agriculture, energy, finance, politics, and transportation. Your issues may vary depending on the nature of your work in Washington. The bottom line is you need to forge links with issue authorities in your field, and forge them quickly.

One source for identifying these contacts is the legion of think tanks that exist in Washington. From The Brookings Institution to the Cato Institute, and the American Enterprise Institute to the Woodrow Wilson Center, these think tanks are overflowing with academics, former members of the press, and out-of-office politicians. Reporters frequently turn to such thinkers

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for quotes and background. These Inside-the-Beltway “quote machines” specialize in one or two subjects, and most exhibit a distinct political slant. Determine which connections are likely to be most rewarding for you and place them on your target list.

Quick recommendation: Attend events at those think tanks you target to get a better idea of how they might be helpful to you and who to approach there. The U.S. State Department lists some of the [major Washington-based groups](#).

These new professional relationships can help not only on the job, but also may lead to other possibilities such as lecturing and teaching. Those endeavors can open yet more doors. And, of course, personal friendships may develop in some cases, helping to ease the occasional feeling of loneliness and isolation in your new home.

Also, don't ignore new non-professional links. Interacting with new neighbors, fellow school parents, and new friends you meet during the course of your days helps make life a little less lonely and intimidating in your new environment.

A word of caution: Don't delay in seeking out these relationships. You have no time to waste, for before you know it, your tour of duty in Washington can come to an end. This means you must be assertive — perhaps even aggressive — in cultivating contacts in the U.S.

Help Is on the Way

Many new people posted to Washington are replacing one on the way out. Various embassies don't offer a long transition period, if any in some cases, particularly when there is a change of government. Corporate and NGO workers have better odds of a beneficial overlap period.

The Global Communicator's Welcome to Washington Workshop

The American media is often a mystery to non-U.S. press attachés and public affairs officers posted to corporate offices, embassies, and non-governmental organizations in Washington, D.C.

This session helps you navigate your new hometown. You will learn:

- *Which organizations can help you adjust to life in Washington.*
- *How to meet U.S. journalists and communicators.*
- *Background and trends of U.S. media.*

*To arrange your **Global Communicators Welcome to Washington Workshop**, contact Ed Barks at (703) 533-0403 or ebarks@barkscomm.com.*

If you are fortunate enough to have a small overlap — even a few days — ask your predecessors about their contact list for journalists, fellow communicators, and issue experts who can help smooth your transition. Don't be shy about asking who's who. That predecessor's contacts are golden.

The reason for the journalist connections is obvious. New arrivals need to know which relationships to develop in order to pitch stories effectively.

At the same time, don't ignore non-journalistic colleagues. The most helpful person may be a press attaché from another country's embassy, an experienced inside-the-Beltway government relations expert, or a lawyer who can help make connections with important reporters. It's difficult to assess in advance which individuals can open which doors. To emphasize once again, relationship building is a vitally important aspect for any newly posted non-U.S. professional.

A continually expanding circle of contacts is a must. In the U.S., most professionals are open to a request for personal introductions to journalists and others who can help your efforts. Such requests are commonplace (though, admittedly, you will encounter those who don't get it or who hoard their list of contacts). Of course, your requests must be made diplomatically (which should not be difficult given the fact that, officially or unofficially, we are all diplomats for our nations when we travel overseas).

Useful Organizations

In raising the topic of transitions to Washington, D.C., with a variety of global communicators, it was striking that few offered suggestions of organizations dedicated to helping them adjust to a new country. One embassy staffer went so far as to describe all of her contacts as "random". One told the tale of a European Union group that tried to organize programs for embassy employees from its member nations, only to give up for lack of interest and attendance.

Yet there are membership organizations that cater to a variety of journalists, and communicators from abroad may

find involvement in some of them valuable, depending on their backgrounds and the audiences they are attempting to reach. Examples include the [Asian American Journalists Association](#), [National Association of Black Journalists](#), [National Association of Hispanic Journalists](#), and the [Society for Professional Journalists](#). In addition, the [National Press Club](#) holds regular newsmaker events and networking opportunities.

On a broader scale not targeted to communicators specifically, the [Meridian International Center](#) holds a variety of programs of interest to international visitors to America.

Not to be forgotten is the fact that embassies around town sponsor events ranging from concerts to lectures to evening receptions. This represents a good way to meet Washington insiders as well as colleagues from other nations.

Reading about Your New Hometown

What publications can aid your transition? I've long found [Hudson's Washington News Media Contacts Guide](#) to be a great one-stop source to locate D.C.-based media contacts.

For insights into the American journalistic community, keep up to date with publications including the [American Journalism Review](#) and the [Columbia Journalism Review](#). Top students of the U.S. media are also well advised to familiarize themselves with the wide-ranging [Poynter Institute](#) and its examinations of the news business. Also, the Pew Research Center publishes "[State of the News Media](#)," a series of fact sheets devoted to such areas as newspapers, local television news, and podcasting.

For less scholarly, more hands-on perspectives, periodicals like [Strategies & Tactics](#), a publication of the Public Relations Society of America, may provide occasional insights.

There is also a plethora of online media lists. A note of caution: Some are rarely if ever updated and many are sorely incomplete, so verify those sources carefully.

Watching Your New Hometown

As you become a student of the American media, get a grasp on what issues are in play on the national media scene as well as locally on Washington television and radio stations. Why take note of local matters, too? While your issues may have more of an international focus, knowledge of local affairs can be of value as icebreakers during one-on-one conversations. Plus, this is now your neighborhood, so the more you know, the easier your adjustment.

Students of the media often monitor the Sunday morning network television talk shows such as ABC's This Week, CBS Sunday Morning, and NBC's Meet the Press. This is where the heaviest of the heavyweights appear. True, your issues may be discussed only sporadically. Yet it gives you a firm grip on Inside-the-Beltway chatter.

Among the Washington press corps, you will find reporters not only from local media outlets but those from a wide array of publications — both print and online — and electronic media. For example, some regional and local newspapers from across the country maintain bureaus in the nation's capital (though in recent years this number has dwindled significantly due primarily to economic woes). Also, there is a checkerboard of trade publications that covers narrow issues such as banking, energy, international trade, and many more. Don't be fooled by small circulation numbers. While some of the trade press may not reach great numbers of readers, they often reach influential decision-makers.

International communicators in search of complete coverage by U.S. media

should look beyond the major newspapers and television networks. Washington TV stations may reach the audience you desire, as may area radio stations with robust news departments like public station [WAMU](#) and commercial broadcaster [WTOP](#) (this one is a must to monitor commuting conditions to and from work).

As with any targeting effort, it is best to work backward. That is to say, decide who you want to reach, then determine the media channels to which they pay attention. Those channels may or may not reach the masses. That is fine if you are intent on reaching thought leaders in a certain industry or a narrow slice of the population.

Trends in American Media

American media differ significantly from that in many other countries. For instance, there are fewer newspapers in cities in the U.S. than in many other locations. This trend has accelerated in recent years with, regrettably, the closure of many daily papers across the country.

Radio and television stations have been facing a parallel trend for years. While few have shuttered their doors, ownership now largely rests in the hands of corporate conglomerates with no ties to the community. The voice you hear delivering traffic reports or announcing music is as likely to be located in a distant city as in Washington.

American news is becoming more and more “sound bite” oriented. While some of the larger newspapers still go into great depth, television “packages” — or stories — are shorter than ever. One measure of this trend: In the 1968 U.S. presidential campaign, the average television

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sound bite was 43 seconds. It has dwindled to a mere seven seconds in recent elections. Listen to news radio stations and you will find some clips trimmed to as little as three seconds.

It is important to emphasize some general trends in American media. Recent times have not been kind to journalism outlets. With circulation and advertising revenues down, media executives have laid off reporters and slashed budgets.

Why does this matter to the communicator newly posted to Washington? Beyond the fact there are fewer reporters to target, there is an ongoing level of anxiety among members of the media who wonder whether they will have a job next week or, indeed, if their publication will continue to exist. Seemingly every week, news of layoffs at one news bureau or another waft through the halls of journalism.

On a human level, therefore, newly posted communicators who are attuned to this atmosphere may be better able to forge connections with reporters. On a professional level, one of your prime media contacts today may be out of a job tomorrow, meaning you need to keep your rolodex updated religiously. And you will raise your reputation if you can position yourself as one willing and able to help these individuals when they find themselves in need.

The changing media landscape also means an increasing number of freelance reporters, who may represent one publication today and another tomorrow. Yet these freelancers also provide an opportunity, for the savvy ones are constantly in search of story ideas to pitch to editors. After all, these freelancers need to make a living. Helping them secure a good story boosts their business, and helps forge a stronger reporter/source connection for future pursuits, too.

International communicators in search of complete coverage by U.S. media should look beyond the major newspapers and television networks.

The Politics of the American Press

One other fact to note: Unlike some other nations, the U.S. media is not government owned and operated. There is no government interference in day to day operations. This means that American media outlets are more commercialized than many of those abroad. They do, after all, have to pay the bills by selling commercial time.

That said, legitimate newspapers, radio stations, and television broadcasters place firewalls between their news operations and their sales departments. In a practical sense, an organization that purchases an advertisement should not expect more favorable reporting treatment.

A Living Document

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This resource is intended to be a living document, one that you can help to improve.

The content will gain value over time when readers like you contribute suggestions for publication in subsequent editions.

I heartily encourage you to do so, with ideas large and seemingly small.

Send your suggestions to ebarks@barkscomm.com.

The politics of U.S. newspapers also differs. It is not uncommon for newspapers in other lands to shout openly their political preferences. American media outlets tend to be more all-encompassing and nuanced, not beholden to one political movement or another. To be sure, Washington offers the more liberal *Washington Post* and the more conservative *Washington Times*. And one can see clear differences from one editorial page to the other. As for the slant of coverage in their news sections, however, they often cover the same news in generally the same way.

Newspaper opinion sections — known as the op-ed pages — are a feature in most of the American press. On these pages, a wide range of experts from politicians to business executives to NGO leaders share their viewpoints on crucial issues of the day. Most newspapers present a cross-section of views. For example, *The Washington Post*, as noted above a more liberal outlet, has regular op-ed columns written by conservative thinkers and often runs guest columns from conservative Republican officeholders.

As an aside, it is useful to note that NGO is not a term widely used in the U.S. Such entities are more typically referred to as non-profit organizations. While many Americans who run in global circles know the term, outside such groups you may get blank stares if you use the term NGO.

Non-traditional Media

Once upon a time, media relations experts needed to be familiar with only the newspapers, magazines, trade publications, and television and radio stations that covered their issues. That horizon has broadened significantly in recent years.

Blogs have become more of a factor. There are those who will argue that blogs are not truly media outlets (a viewpoint to

which I subscribe); that is a deeper argument for another day. Suffice to say, there are bloggers who adhere to ethical media standards and who reach wide audiences. The trick for the international communicator comes in determining which ones are legitimate, widely read, and worth pursuing.

Digital media is now an entrenched part of the landscape, and should be considered as you consider your communications campaigns. Just be sure to fold it into your overall

communications plan; never isolate it. After all, channels like Facebook, LinkedIn, and TikTok (and whatever new gadgets tomorrow may hold) are nothing more than tools. Yes, they can be powerful when used wisely, but they are simply extensions of tried and true techniques like the news release, the op-ed, and the interview with a reporter.

Use of digital media differs little from your other approaches. Decide what audience you want to connect with, then determine what digital channels touch them most effectively. Of course, it is a good idea to follow your targeted audience on digital media to get a better idea of their thinking and how you can add value for them.

A Warm Welcome to You

Allow me to extend my personal welcome to you as you adjust to life in the USA. Yes, it can be a challenging time for newly arrived corporate and NGO press officers and press attachés posted to embassies in Washington. Take comfort in the fact that you are not alone. Newly posted diplomats and international communicators step onto American soil regularly.

Your smooth transition revolves around forging bonds with others who can help you adjust, both professionally and personally. Use the ideas in this paper to reach out to reporters who cover issues that matter to you and your organization. Get to know colleagues in the communications and public affairs fields who can help you uncover some of the mysteries of the American media. Don't forget about individuals from your country who are already in the U.S.

I hope you find this report useful in making your transition easier, offering some advice on where to turn for answers, and referring you to materials and media operations that can make your life easier and more enjoyable.

You will blaze your own path as you adjust to your new life, and are likely to come across organizations and news outlets that aid in your transition. I encourage you to [share your discoveries with me](#) so that updates of "The Global Communicator's Welcome to Washington Guide" can become even more useful for those who follow in your footsteps.

Wishing you the best of success and happiness in your new life in America.

About the Author

Author and communications strategy consultant **Ed Barks** works with communications and government relations executives who counsel their C-suite leaders, and with businesses and associations that need bottom line results from their communications strategy and messaging. They gain an enhanced reputation, greater confidence, more opportunities for career advancement, and achievement of long-term business and public policy goals.



He is the **author of [four business books](#)**:

- *Insider Strategies for the Confident Communicator: How to Master Meetings, Presentations, Interviews, and Advocacy*
- *Reporters Don't Hate You: 100+ Amazing Media Relations Strategies*
- *A+ Strategies for C-Suite Communications: Turning Today's Leaders into Tomorrow's Influencers*
- *The Truth About Public Speaking: The Three Keys to Great Presentations*

Ed contributes to a variety of publications and is the former “Speaking Sense” columnist for the *Washington Business Journal*. He has also published numerous research reports and position papers, including [“A Buyer’s Guide To Communications Strategy Consultants.”](#)

More than 5700 business leaders, association executives, scientists, government officials, entertainers, and other thought leaders thank Ed for sharpening their communications edge.

According to his clients, he “knows how to elicit peak performance.” They call him “a master at connecting with his audience” and “an effective educator,” and give his communications training workshops “two thumbs up!”

He has served as President of Barks Communications since founding it in 1997. He served a nine-year tenure on the Board of Governors of the **National Press Club** and joined the faculty of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Institute for Organization Management. He is a former member of the board of directors of the Institute of Management Consultants National Capital Region, and the Consultants Section Council of the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE).

An inside-the-Beltway veteran, Ed has spent more than three decades in Washington, D.C. He brings another critical perspective to his clients’ communications needs — that of a broadcaster and journalist. He knows firsthand the traits and techniques of the reporting trade, thanks to a decade of experience in radio.

Ed also publishes the **C-suite Blueprint blog**. [Follow him there](#) to receive instant notification of each post.