

By ELEANOR RANDOLPH

Reporters, like seagulls, fly to the spot where somebody is handing out even dry crusts of news. So, when a cluster began forming recently in one corner of the news center set up for the summit, it kept growing larger and larger as everyone hurried to get a crumb of the action.

Elbowing my way through notebooks and tape recorders to the source of all this excitement, I found a strange subject. It was a television set, tuned to Cable News Network and broadcasting the Soviet leader live from his embassy.

More often than not these days, covering a megamedia event means working feverishly to stay in front of the tube. The chance for most of the 6,800 credentialed journalists to see one of the participants in happenings such as the summit between President Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev is worse than their chance to win \$1 million in a magazine sweepstakes.

The chance to watch somebody who actually watched the real participants is better. Occasionally, press spokesmen who were there come to the press center at George Washington University about six long blocks from the White House and even farther from the Soviet Embassy. But most of these events are televised.

A few reporters are chosen to "pool," or appear with a small group of reporters whose job is to represent everybody. But even those pool reporters would do better to see their targets electronically rather than in the flesh. For example, the group that accompanied Gorbachev to the embassy where he gave a speech to intellectuals, cultural leaders and movie stars was kept on a bus for two hours, then told at the embassy that there would be "no writers, no writers at all."

Don't stray too far from the television

"We were allowed to look into the room from the doorway for about a minute," pool reporter Jerry Seib of the Wall Street Journal reported to his peers. Meanwhile, CNN broadcast most of the event live.

Peter Jenkins, a British journalist with a sharp eye for the absurd, observed his fellow news-hands feverishly taking notes from the television set and shook his head sadly.

"It never pays to get too far from the office, to try to go to the site of the event," Jenkins said. "It simply puts you out of position." Too far from the telly, he meant.

CNN or C-Span seldom receive recognition for providing this service. Neither do the Associated Press, Reuters and United Press International, whose skeletal news reports often give the key about what is really "news" to anybody troubled with doubt about what has happened here.

The White House provides texts of speeches. A briefing service provides word-for-word transcripts of important briefings, so that unless pressed for time, one can listen to the briefing and not even take notes. The best notes will be forthcoming.

That front-row seat that every reporter seems to have at these events? Little credit goes to the "pool" reporters, who dutifully write details of everything they saw, details printed up by government aides and passed out to everybody else. It is considered very bad form to be on a pool and then withhold even an adjective for oneself.

As a result, in many cases, R-

2,D-2 could write a story on one of these big international mega-events. It isn't reporting; it's digesting. It takes stamina (a reporter has to wait hours for briefings and pool reports), but not much intellectual energy. Why some poor Southwestern radio station has to send a reporter to Washington to be on the scene is a mystery. Like virtually everyone else, he or she never gets anywhere near the scene. The most that reporter can expect is to be able to loiter under the same weather system as the summit principals and say with absolute assurance that the superpowerful were blessed with a few beautiful days.

Newsday columnist Murray Kempton decided that even sharing the sunshine wasn't absolutely necessary. "I can get that on the weather channel," said a frustrated Kempton, who said that this was his second summit without seeing a participant in the flesh.

It's vastly easier if you work for a network or The New York Times or The Washington Post. Calls go through quickly. A Harvard University expert or a mid-level bureaucrat with expertise in this area is on the phone in a few minutes. Moreover, most of these big organizations have at least a dozen people with credentials and can afford to have somebody else, even a telephone operator, sitting in the press center collecting "news."

Rare is the reporter from Utah or Texas who can find somebody with expert knowledge and a spare minute. If he or she gets a scoop, or even an elaboration of the briefing, it's time for a raise.

To cover this summit, a reporter is asked for his or her birth date, Social Security number and press credential. But the most important question may be: Is a working television set available?

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