

Media Representatives Visit Campus to Begin Preparations for Presidential Debate

Contributed by Lee Eric Smith
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Joani Wardwell of the Commission on Presidential Debates leads a group of media representatives near the Ford Center. UM photo by Harry Briscoe.

OXFORD, Miss. - Officially, the media circus that is the first 2008 Presidential Debate won't start until the fourth week of September. Unofficially, it began Wednesday.

That's when dozens of producers and technical advisors from local and national news organizations visited the University of Mississippi for a site inspection. Their job: to look around campus, kick the tires and determine exactly what it's going to take to present this event to the world.

The exit polls are favorable.

"It's a lovely setting," said John Reade, a veteran CBS senior producer who covered the 1976 Presidential Debate and the 1988 Vice Presidential Debate. "The Ford Center is a beautiful theater. You're going to have hundreds of media types running around so it'll be crazy, but debates are fun. Everything is going to work out fine."

Representatives for the Commission on Presidential Debates hosted local and regional media in the morning, with national news outlets such as ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and Fox News touring in the afternoon. They were at UM to scout locations and coordinate behind-the-scenes details that viewers never think about - including where to place satellite trucks, how far they'll have to run cable and the like.

"The Ford Center is going to look great, given the sit-down format of the debate," said Glenn Elvington, operations producer for ABC News. "But it's not going to be any more challenging here than it would be anywhere else. It's just a matter of dealing with what we've been given, how the campus is laid out."

Watch video story from the media visit.

Meanwhile, NBC News Channel producer Julie Jarvis had something far less technical on her mind. During a lull, she was busy telling her team in Washington, D.C., to start booking hotel rooms, which are expected to be at a premium. Other than that, she's already envisioning the stories she'd like to tell.

"I wanted to come, meet people and make contacts," Jarvis said. "There's a very rich history here that should make the debate that much more interesting. With Ole Miss' history, the fact that America's first black nominee from a major political party is coming here ... it kind of brings things full circle."

Marty Slutsky, executive producer for the Commission on Presidential Debates, said that the media site visit went as expected, adding that logistical challenges are just part of the process.

"The hotels, telecommunications and media tent issues have all been sorted out," said Slutsky, who is familiar with the Ford Center from his work on Mississippi Rising, a Hurricane Katrina relief concert in 2005. "But all those things are fairly standard, and to me were not an issue. Now, everything is locked and loaded and we're ready to move ahead on September 26."

For more on the upcoming debate visit:

