



President Barack Obama
The White House
Washington, D.C.

Aug. 10, 2015

Dear Mr. President,

One year ago more than 40 journalism and government accountability organizations expressed deep concern about the constraints on information in the federal government today. These include:

- prohibiting staff from communicating with journalists unless they maneuver through public affairs offices or through political appointees;
- refusing to allow reporters to speak to staff at all, or delaying interviews past the point they would be useful;
- monitoring interviews; and
- speaking only on the condition that the official not be identified even when he or she has title of spokesperson.

The response Mr. Josh Earnest sent the Society of Professional Journalists on August 11, 2014, failed to address these issues, and despite repeated requests to discuss the issue publicly, the White House has yet to engage in a meaningful conversation.

We request again, just weeks after the 49th anniversary of the U.S. Freedom of Information Act and 239th anniversary of our nation, that you change these practices in your administration and participate in a public dialogue toward improving the flow of information for the American people.

The public has a right to be alarmed by these constraints – essentially forms of censorship – that have surged at all levels of government in the past few decades. Surveys of journalists and public information officers (PIOs) demonstrate that the restraints have become pervasive across the country; that some PIOs admit to blocking certain reporters when they don't like what is written; and that most Washington reporters say the public is not getting the information it needs because of constraints. An SPJ survey released in April confirmed that science writers frequently run into these barriers.

This information suppression is fraught with danger. A recent review found that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had a culture of unsafe handling of dangerous pathogens and that some staff feared reporting incidents. Last year the Food and Drug Administration announced it had smallpox, among other dangerous materials, in an apparently uninventoried storage for decades in violation of some of the most solemn of international treaties. All the employees working around those situations for years were forbidden to speak to reporters without surveillance by the PIOs, as was all other staff in those agencies.

Some federal officials have said these policies are appropriate because employees can become whistleblowers to report wrongdoings. These whistleblower policies do not work.

We acknowledge that the PIO function is often important for creating a strong central point for synthesizing and distributing official information, and we appreciate the dedication and

earnestness of these public employees. But information-control practices have gone too far, and must be curtailed for the good of our democracy and reputation in the world.

You can act now, before the end of your term, to shift the federal government away from secrecy toward transparency and accountability. When you first entered office you pledged to become the most transparent president in history. It is not too late to fulfill that promise.

We urge you, Mr. President, to publicly affirm your commitment to transparency, to issue an executive order prohibiting restrictive public information policies, and to engage in a public discussion on neutral ground, perhaps at the National Archives, so that Americans can be assured their government is dedicated to the free flow of information for democracy to effectively work.

Sincerely,

Dana Neuts
President, Society of Professional Journalists
spj@virtuallyyours.com

Paul Fletcher
President-Elect, Society of Professional Journalists
pletcher@spj.org

David Cuillier
Chair, SPJ Freedom of Information Committee
spjdave@yahoo.com

Jeff Burnside
President, Society of Environmental Journalists
jburnside@sej.org

Roy S. Gutterman
Director, Tully Center for Free Speech
rsgutter@syr.edu

Patrice McDermott
Director, OpenTheGovernment.org
pmcdermott@openthegovernment.org

Mark Newton
President, Journalism Education Association
Themarknewton@gmail.com

Charles W. L. Deale
Executive Director, National Press Photographers Association
CDeale@nppa.org

Mickey Osterreicher

General Counsel, National Press Photographers Association
lawyer@nppa.org

Sarah Cohen
President, Investigative Reporters & Editors
sarahcohen@ire.org

Janelle Hartman
The NewsGuild-Communications Workers of America
jhartman@cwa-union.org

Tiffany Schackelford
Executive Director, Association of Alternative Newsmedia
tiffany@aan.org

Kevin M. Goldberg
Legal Counsel, American Society of News Editors
goldberg@fhhlaw.com

Mike Cavender
Executive Director, Radio Television Digital News Association
mikec@rtdna.org

Mickey Huff
Director, Project Censored/Media Freedom Foundation
Mickey@projectcensored.org

Debra L. Mason
Executive Director, Religion Newswriters Association
masondl@missouri.edu

Teresa Schmedding
President, American Copy Editors Society
tschmedding@dailyherald.com

Beatrice Edwards
Executive Director, Government Accountability Project
beae@whistleblower.org

Jane McDonnell
Director, Online News Association
director@journalists.org

Christophe Deloire
Secretary General, Reporters Without Borders
cdeloire@rsf.org

Delphine Halgand
US Director, Reporters Without Borders
delphine@rsf.org

Gail Kent
President, Virginia Professional Communicators
gail.kent@thebuzzfactoree.com

Danielle Brian
Executive Director, Project On Government Oversight
danielle@pogo.org

Daniel Schuman
Policy Director, Demand Progress
daniel@demandprogress.org

Bruce Brown
Executive Director, Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press
bbrown@rcfp.org

Randy Dotinga, President; Sherry Beck Paprocki
Vice President; and Alexandra Owens, Executive Director
American Society of Journalists and Authors
director@asja.org

Matt Rumsey
Director of the Advisory Committee on Transparency, Sunlight Foundation
mrumsey@sunlightfoundation.com

J.H. "Jim" Snider
President, iSolon.org
snider@iSolon.org

Elizabeth Toth
President, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
eltoth@umd.edu

Joel Simon
Executive Director, Committee to Protect Journalists
info@cpj.org

Adam Pawlus
Executive Director, National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association
adam@nlgja.org

Katy Glenn Bass
Deputy Director, PEN American Center
kglennbass@pen.org

Todd Gillman
President, Regional Reporters Association
rrapresident@gmail.com

Jason Begay
President, Native American Journalists Association
JBegay@gmail.com

Diana Mitsu Klos
Executive Director, National Scholastic Press Association
Diana@studentpress.org

Diana Mitsu Klos
Executive Director, Associated Collegiate Press
Executive Director, Minnesota High School Press Association
Diana@studentpress.org

Mark Goodman
Knight Chair in Scholastic Journalism, Center for Scholastic Journalism
mgoodm10@kent.edu

Justin Silverman
New England First Amendment Coalition
justin@nefirstamendment.org

Chris Peck
President, American Society of News Editors
chrispeck1950@yahoo.com

Trevor Timm
Executive Director, Freedom of the Press Foundation
trevor@freedom.press

Caroline Hendrie
Executive Director, Education Writers Association
chendrie@ewa.org

Dylan Smith
Chairman, Local Independent Online News Producers
dylansmith@lionpublishers.com

Frank LoMonte
Executive Director, Student Press Law Center
director@splc.org

Jeff Ruch
Executive Director, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility
jruch@peer.org

Mekahlo Medina
President, National Association of Hispanic Journalists
mekahlonahj@gmail.com

Sue Udry
Executive Director, Defending Dissent Foundation
Acting Director, Bill of Rights Defense Committee
sue.udry@defendingdissent.org

Lauren-Glenn Davitian
Executive Director, Center for Media and Democracy
davitian@cctv.org

Kathy Chow
Executive Director, Asian American Journalists Association
kathyc@aaja.org

Tim Franklin
President, The Poynter Institute
tfranklin@poynter.org

David D. Haynes
President, Association of Opinion Journalists
david.haynes@jrn.com

Teri Ehresman
President, National Federation of Press Women
presswomen@aol.com

Sandy Michel Nance
President, Colorado Press Women
smnance@aol.com

Walid el-Gabry
President, Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association
walidelgabry@yahoo.com

Rachele Kanigel
President, College Media Association
rkanigel@gmail.com

Russell Contreras
President, UNITY
Russell.contreras@gmail.com

--END--