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 uninventoryed 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,

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