



SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS.
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Dear Member of Congress,

Over the last 25 years there has been a relatively rapid trend toward federal agencies and others prohibiting staff members from communicating to journalists without reporting to some authority, often public information officers. The restrictions have become, in great part, a cultural norm in the United States. They also have become an effective form of censorship by which powerful entities keep the American people ignorant about what impacts them. Several groups have been working for years to spark changes.

We emphasize that these blockages regularly keep information from the public, the leadership of the agencies and entities themselves, and from Congress.

When public information officers or “minders” create barriers to access and information, democracy suffers. We strongly believe federal employees should be free to communicate with journalists without the impediments.

We, the undersigned 27 journalism and open government organizations, note that the Scientific Integrity Act (H.R. 1709 and S. 775), as introduced by Rep. Paul Tonko (D-NY) and Sen. Brian Schatz (D-HI), had the intent of allowing federal scientists to speak to the media as well as publish scientific findings, participate in scientific organizations and communicate in other ways.

The bill’s introduction would have been an important step in promoting discussion of these extraordinarily dangerous blockages to free speech.

Unfortunately, the little protection the bill contained for scientists’ right to speak to the press was stripped out in the Oct. 17 mark-up in the House Science, Space and Technology Committee.

We call on Congress to support the right of unimpeded communication with journalists for all federal employees and not just for scientists.

We also stress that, contrary to language in the bill as introduced, it is critical the nation ensure that all federal employees have the right to communicate with the press without reporting contacts with the authorities or anyone, before or after the contacts. Forcing employees to report conversations, even after the fact, creates intimidation that deprives us all of important information. It is also important that reporters who do make requests to an agency must be able to speak to the requested persons and not be confined to spokespersons.

We call on Congress to hold hearings on these free speech issues and to work with the Executive Branch to complete a thorough examination on why free speech has become so undermined for millions of people that legislation is needed to allow free speech without reporting to authorities, and on what those restrictions do to the nation's functioning.

Please note, the [Society of Professional Journalists has sponsored seven surveys since 2012](#), of reporters and PIOs in the federal government, science, education and police departments and found the blockages through PIOs are pervasive and a major problem in reporting.

[The Brechner Center for Freedom of Information just published a research paper](#) responding to what we've heard from journalists and media lawyers nationally about their most persistent "pain points" in gathering news. Right at the top of the list is government agency policies that forbid public employees (teachers, police, scientists) from giving interviews without the approval of a PIO.

Most of the undersigned groups have previously sent letters to President Donald Trump and former President Barack Obama demanding attention to this issue. In addition, [a coalition representing 53 journalism and open government groups met with President Obama's press secretary](#) at the White House in December 2015 about the issue.

The delegation of journalists — from SPJ, the Society of Environmental Journalists and the American Society of News Editors — was promised a response to their concerns but never received one.

It is essential to public welfare and democracy that this issue is addressed. Not allowing experts to speak freely to reporters is authoritarian and keeps sources from explaining a variety of things that are the public's business.

This "Censorship by PIO" works in tandem with other assaults on free speech including restrictions on public records, threats and physical assaults on reporters, prosecution of whistleblowers and threats of prosecution against reporters.

Please support efforts against these blockages and keep this conversation going so information can be more freely shared. The strength of our democracy depends on it.

Respectfully,

American Society of Journalists and Authors, Inc.
American Society of Magazine Editors
Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication
Association of Alternative News Media
Association of Health Care Journalists
Defending Rights & Dissent
International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors
iSolon.org
Journalism Education Association
Media Freedom Foundation
National Association of Black Journalists
National Federation of Press Women
National Press Photographers Association
National Scholastic Press Association/Associated Collegiate Press
National Society of Newspaper Columnists
National Writers Union, President

New England First Amendment Coalition
News Leaders Association
Open the Government
Project Censored
Radio Television Digital News Association
Religion News Association
Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press
Society for Advancing Business Editing and Writing
Society of Environmental Journalists
Society of Professional Journalists
Tully Center for Free Speech