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Sent: Wednesday, January 26, 2022 10:46 AM

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Subject: To OSTP: Journalists call for federal staff members to be free to speak without monitoring

Dr. Eric Steven Lander

Director, Office of Science and Technology Policy

Dr. Alondra R. Nelson

Deputy Director for Science and Society, OSTP

Dr. Jane A. Lubchenco

Deputy Director for Climate and the Environment, OSTP

Dear Dr. Lander, Dr. Nelson and Dr. Lubchenco:

Thank you for your work on the report, "[Protecting the Integrity of Government Science.](#)"

On behalf of organizations of journalists, we welcome this statement in the report's foreword: "Federal scientists should be able to speak freely, if they wish, about their unclassified research, including to members of the press."

We're glad you stressed that as a fundamental principle of scientific integrity. Too often over the years – and even up to the present – federal scientists and other staff have been prohibited from speaking with journalists without clearance from a supervisor or public information officer.

That not only violates the scientists' First Amendment rights, it tramples on the public's right to know, and it contributes to the spread of misinformation and distrust in government.

These restrictions on journalists' access to government staff have grown up in a [range of entities and sectors](#) throughout our society, particularly over the last two to three decades. Veteran reporters remember times when such constraints were nonexistent in many federal agencies.

Since 2010, groups of journalists and others have [tried repeatedly](#) to warn administrations of how damaging the censorship is, including meeting with White House officials in 2015. Last July, 25 groups [wrote to OSTP](#) asking that the blockages be ended.

We had hoped your report would follow through and repudiate the wide-ranging restrictions that have been placed on the ability of government scientists and others to share their research and knowledge with the press and the public. Unfortunately, the guidance given in the rest of the report perpetuates the status quo, undermining if not negating that important principle.

Your report calls for developing "specific media communications policies and procedures that apply to practicing scientists." For reference, it cites memoranda from the Obama and Biden administrations that call for allowing media access "in coordination with supervisors and public affairs officials."

There's the rub. Most if not all federal agencies and departments have policies – written or unwritten – requiring all calls or emails from reporters to be referred to a press office. Having public information officers act as "gatekeepers" for interview and information requests has slowed and effectively

constricted the flow of information to journalists. The public is instead often fed a steady diet of curated information and official “talking points” designed to support the agency’s position.

It seems you tried to address the problem in your guidance. There’s this: "To promote transparency and trust, communications professionals should work collaboratively with scientists being interviewed, helping scientists effectively navigate media interviews, and supporting—not censoring—the flow of scientific information."

But that’s not nearly enough. While such policies are ostensibly aimed at ensuring journalists get accurate, timely and complete information, in practice it often results in just the opposite. When journalists’ calls and emails get shunted to a press office, their requests for interviews or even answers to their queries get delayed by hours, days, weeks and even months - often past deadline. In too many cases, the rules mean reporters get nothing useful at all.

The delay in responses could be because the public information officers are overwhelmed or inexperienced – something that could be remedied by increasing communications staff and training. Or it could be that PIOs have also been muzzled by agency managers trying to suppress information that could be embarrassing or contradictory to agency messaging.

Finally, media policies in effect prohibit unmonitored contact between staff and journalists which is the source of much critical information, including about abuses of science and misconduct. Last July, for example, after news broke of four EPA scientists filing a whistleblower complaint alleging managers improperly altered chemical risk assessments, the chief of staff in that office emailed everyone reminding them they were [“not authorized”](#) to answer press questions directly and instructing them to refer all journalists to the press office.

The only surefire solution in any case is to free the scientists and other staff to speak.

Even though your report is final, we urge you to amend or supplement it by stating, in the clearest and strongest terms possible, that federal scientists need no one’s permission to share their research or knowledge with journalists and the public. It’s fine to ask them to voluntarily inform communications offices of such contacts, but they shouldn’t be required to report them or fear being chastised or disciplined for not doing so. The American public deserves the full story from their government scientists and other staff, not a sanitized version that’s filtered through a political or policy lens.

Thank you for your attention.

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