

Public information officers exert increasing controls

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Abstract

Journalists have long experienced a love-hate relationship with government public information officers (PIOs) in setting the public agenda, particularly at the federal level. Three surveys of journalists and PIOs examined whether government controls impact journalists' gatekeeping roles. Results indicated that journalists felt PIO controls are increasing, that reporters covering federal agencies express the most frustration, and that PIOs at the federal level indicate the greatest need for controls over journalists.

Keywords

media management, quantitative, survey, correlation and regression analysis, multimedia, United States, agenda setting, newspaper, Society of Professional Journalists

The presumption in a democracy is that citizens must have information about their government to adequately self-govern.¹ Toward that end, journalists are responsible for providing information to the public, acting as proxies for citizens and serving as watchdogs on the government.² Part of that is accomplished through direct observation—journalists attending city council meetings or congressional hearings. Part is accomplished through public records—applying freedom of information statutes to acquire documents.³

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And a significant part is accomplished by simply talking to those in government, either elected officials, agency employees or public information officers (PIOs).

The first two methods of public affairs reporting enjoy protections by statute and common law, e.g., open meeting laws and the requirement under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act for government to provide records.⁴ But there is no law requiring a public official to *talk* to journalists or citizens, so the ability for reporters to get government information relies heavily upon the willingness of officials to be voluntarily forthcoming with information.

While research has examined the release of documents by the government,⁵ few studies have looked beyond the statutory requirements of transparency to examine the voluntary information-sharing practices of government—of PIOs being forthcoming and helpful in providing information upon request. Tension has always existed between journalists and PIOs,⁶ but reporters of late have expressed more frustration in acquiring information from government PIOs, particularly at federal agencies.⁷

The Chicago Headline Club, for example, commissioned a survey of 224 Chicago-area journalists in 2011 to find 41 percent of reporters said accessing information from the federal government was getting worse.⁸ In West Virginia, journalists expressed frustration in early 2014 following a chemical leak in the Elk River drinking water supply, threatening 300,000 residents. The Environmental Protection Agency and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention refused to answer questions from Ken Ward, Jr., a longtime investigative reporter for *The Charleston Gazette*. When he requested information about the effects of the chemicals on pregnant women, the CDC responded by saying there was no “urgent need” to inform the public about the issue.⁹

Even members of Congress have expressed frustrations over stonewalling by federal agencies, leading a congressional oversight committee to launch a website in 2014 soliciting examples from the public of excessive secrecy and information control by the Department of Veterans Affairs.¹⁰ President Barack Obama, despite promising to be the most transparent president in history,¹¹ has been criticized for excessive controls over information, including the management of White House photographs¹² and increased delays and denials through the Freedom of Information Act.¹³ In July 2014, the Society of Professional Journalists and 37 other journalism organizations sent a letter to Obama urging an end to excessive controls by PIOs, such as requiring questions in writing before interviews, having PIOs monitor and direct interviews with agency employees, prohibiting employees from speaking to journalists and blackballing reporters who question too aggressively.¹⁴ The same groups, along with a dozen more, sent a second letter to the president in August 2015, again urging change.¹⁵

This has significant ramifications for the nature of news citizens receive about their government, particularly national public affairs information and the setting of the public agenda. As journalists take on more responsibilities because of newsroom cuts, they become more reliant on PIOs for information and more vulnerable to control tactics. Sources favorable to an agency’s positive reputation will be more likely to set the agenda; whereas, employees who might expose wrongdoing or agency problems will be less likely to connect with journalists and the public. Ultimately, this might threaten citizens’ ability to receive the information they need to self-govern effectively.

Grounded in agenda building and gatekeeping theories, this exploratory study examines the state of press access to government information through PIOs to assess whether relations are changing, particularly at the federal level, whether journalists

perceive less information is reaching the public and to identify factors related to PIO controls over information. The researchers used two national surveys of journalists and one national survey of PIOs to illuminate this conflict zone where the gatekeepers clash.

Literature Review

During the past 50 years, more than 150 studies have examined the relationship between public relations practitioners and journalists in their roles influencing the public agenda.¹⁶ Building from McCombs' and Shaw's agenda-setting theory,¹⁷ this area of research seeks to explain how media influence the salience of topics of interest to the public. Media do not act in a vacuum, though. "Agenda building" places emphasis on the influence of outside forces (e.g., PR practitioners) on the media's ability to set the agenda, where the media's agenda is treated as a dependent variable.¹⁸ Ultimately, examining what influences journalists helps explain what influences the news and what is communicated to the public that leads to societal discussion and change.

Social psychologist Kurt Lewin proposed gatekeeping theory more than 60 years ago to explain how journalists decide what information to provide the public, what facts will be included in stories, how they are presented and what is excluded.¹⁹ Early gatekeeping studies focused on how individual-level characteristics, such as a reporter's upbringing and ideology, affect news decisions.²⁰ Shoemaker and Reese's hierarchical model of news influences, however, suggests personal factors are overshadowed by routine external forces, such as newsroom socialization, professional norms and organizational factors.²¹ For example, studies show wire editors who select stories for publication tend to base their decisions on suggestions from wire services because of time constraints.²² In line with the hierarchical model of news influences, it is possible time constraints caused by reduced staffing and economic forces outside a journalist's control could influence reporters' decisions to rely more heavily on readily available sources, such as public information officers.

Government public information officers have long served an important role in agenda building because they provide the media with access to official sources reporters often prefer for their stories.²³ Public relations practitioners influence the media's agenda-building process through their press releases and pitch letters and have been successful in impacting how their organizations are portrayed.²⁴ A study from 2006, for example, found 413 U.S. journalists interviewed between 1991 and 2004 estimated nearly half of news is influenced by public relations practitioners.²⁵ Another study found some journalists rely on PR "subsidies" for more than two-thirds or more of their content,²⁶ and press reliance on PIOs increases when resources at news organizations are stretched thin.²⁷

At the same time, researchers have long noted an adversarial relationship between journalists and public relations professionals.²⁸ Studies have examined the relationship and interactions between journalists and public information officers at specific levels of government, such as presidential press secretaries,²⁹ federal agency PIOs³⁰ and state media relations professionals,³¹ as well as those at the local level.³² Journalists complain of PR practitioners stonewalling and hiding information, and PIOs see many journalists as inaccurate, distrustful and vacuous.³³ Often, government PIOs want to

be helpful and value transparency in principle but acknowledge a variety of factors can make reality difficult, including lack of time and resources.³⁴ Some research indicated an easing of the tension between the two groups in the 1990s.³⁵

While conflict between journalists and government is long established and inherent in a democracy, recent literature has indicated increased sophistication within public relations toward more deliberate strategies to influence journalists. Two of the common traditional public relations procedures examined by J.E. Grunig are press agency and public information. This type of public relations focuses on sending information one-way to the public via the media.³⁶ Traditionally, public relations instruction has focused on the need for PIOs to develop trusting relationships with reporters through being responsive on deadline, making announcements at favorable times, writing good press releases and being accessible.³⁷ However, some have suggested PIOs should apply more sophisticated methods to influence journalists³⁸ and incorporate public relations training in public administration education to better manage media messaging.³⁹

According to the *Media Relations Handbook for Government, Associations, Nonprofits and Elected Officials*, for example, public relations practitioners are instructed to maintain control over whom to provide to the media as a spokesperson and to make sure the spokesperson is well trained in the organization's message.⁴⁰ PIOs are also encouraged to be present during the interview, take extensive notes and jump into the interview if the "spokesperson is stumbling and clearly needs help."⁴¹ PIOs are encouraged to record the interview so they can clear up misunderstandings about quotes or facts that may appear in a reporter's story. PIOs may insist on questions being provided in advance of the interview, or they may prohibit agency employees from talking to the media at all.⁴² All of these techniques control information going to journalists and, therefore, the public.

More so, as news moves online at a faster, more competitive pace, the need for immediacy might impact routine forces on gatekeeping decisions for both online and print journalists.⁴³ Shoemaker and Vos in 2009 argued the idea of gates, gatekeepers, forces and channels are still as relevant today as when Lewin first proposed them. They identified three channels: the source channel, where information enters from experts, observers and other interested parties, such as public information officers; the media channel, where information flows through reporters, editors and interactive staffers; and the audience channel, where information enters through Twitter feeds, Facebook posts, smart phone cameras and other devices that record events.

In this model, the audience has replaced attention-grabbing for newsworthiness as its primary news criteria,⁴⁴ and government is able to circumvent journalists and communicate directly with the public. While journalists might strive to report fairly and accurately, some get it wrong. Alert public information officers have taken advantage of the emergence of the audience as a gatekeeper and are bypassing the news media to send their messages directly to citizens via Twitter, Facebook and other social media outlets.⁴⁵

Given traditional newsrooms have been hobbled by the recession,⁴⁶ leading to more reliance on public information officers, given PR tactics appear to be more sophisticated in managing the message and given new online communication methods have allowed PIOs to circumvent the media, the researchers are interested in knowing journalists' perceptions regarding the influence of government PIOs on their work, ultimately the public agenda, as well as PIOs' perceptions toward journalists and their ability to manage the message. Are the gatekeepers under siege?

Research Questions and Hypothesis

Little research has examined current practices and perceptions of journalists and government PIOs, so researchers here will pose two research questions and one hypothesis.

The researchers are first interested in assessing journalists' perceptions of government PIOs and their public relations strategies in order to find out whether journalists perceive change in the nature of information that ultimately reaches the public and what factors are related to perceptions of control. Is information control dependent more on individual-level factors of journalists or routine external forces, as Shoemaker and Reese would suggest?

R1:

How do journalists perceive PIO controls, and what factors are related to controls on journalists?

Also, the researchers are interested in knowing how *PIOs* see their role today in conveying information to the public and working with journalists.

R2:

How do PIOs view their role in working with journalists to provide information to the public, and what factors are related to that media control?

Access to information held by federal agencies is critical for the nation's self-government. Some defenders of the Obama Administration, such as the president's press secretary, have said complaints from journalists about excessive information control are just part of the tension between government and journalists and that the federal government is no worse than any other government agencies.⁴⁷ Given the growing evidence, however, by journalists and scholars indicating a lack of transparency by the Obama Administration, as well as the nature of federal agencies compared to local agencies, the researchers posed a hypothesis.

H1:

PIO controls of journalists will be strongest at the federal level, compared to those at the local government level.

Method

To answer the research questions and hypothesis, the researchers implemented three national exploratory surveys. One survey focused on reporters who cover only federal government agencies. A second survey focused on journalists who cover a variety of government agencies—local, state and federal—to test the study's hypothesis that controls will be expressed most strongly at federal agencies. The third survey

focused on PIOs working for different government agencies, including local, state and federal organizations, to compare their attitudes toward press control and also to test the hypothesis.

Federal Reporters Survey

In 2012, the researchers acquired a sample of 776 reporters identified by the Society of Professional Journalists as covering federal agencies. An email was sent to the reporters Jan. 23, 2012, and was followed by six more messages for a month until closing the survey Feb. 24, 2012. In all, 146 reporters completed the survey, for a 19 percent response rate.⁴⁸

Survey Questions

The researchers included 17 questions about their experience with PIOs and in acquiring public records from agencies, as well as questions about their demographics and jobs (sex, age, race, Hispanic/non-Hispanic, years of experience, job status, title, beat, news organization type and agency they cover). The PIO-related questions were coded in a Likert-type scale so a higher number indicated greater frustration on the part of journalists and greater control by PIOs. The questions asked the journalists, for example, whether they are required to get approval from a PIO before interviewing agency employees, whether they have been prohibited from interviewing employees and whether their interviews are monitored by PIOs. The seven PIO questions were averaged to create a "PIO Controls" scale (Cronbach's alpha = .76). The questions are provided in Table 1, along with descriptive results.

Local Reporter Survey

In 2014 the researchers conducted a national survey of journalists who cover a variety of government agencies, including cities, counties, education, state politics and the federal government. The researchers acquired a list of 16,500 reporters identified by the Society of Professional Journalists as covering government agencies. From that, the researchers pulled a random sample of 4,000 and sent an email on Jan. 27, 2014, with three follow-up emails until Feb. 21, 2014. Of those email addresses, 450 bounced back, 445 responded to the survey, and 409 completed the survey, for a 12 percent response rate.⁴⁹

Survey Questions

The researchers included 15 questions about respondents' experience with PIOs and in acquiring public records from agencies, including most of the questions asked in the federal reporter survey, as well as questions about their demographics and jobs (sex, age, race, Hispanic/non-Hispanic, years of experience, job status, title, beat and news organization type). The researchers created the same seven-item scale as in the federal reporter survey to measure "PIO Control" (Cronbach's alpha = .80). The scale items are listed in Table 1, along with descriptive responses. Also, the researchers coded the beats of the reporters to delineate those who cover only local government

Table 1
Mean of PIO Control Items Comparing Local Reporters and Federal Reporters

	<i>Local Reporters (N = 409)</i>			<i>Federal Reporters (N = 146)</i>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I am required to obtain approval from the agency public information officer before interviewing agency employees.	406	3.47	1.14	136	3.92	1.16
I have been prohibited by an agency from interviewing agency employees.	404	2.49	.75	136	2.75	1.14
My requests for interviews are forwarded to public affairs officers for selective routing to whomever they want.	404	2.47	1.04	136	3.65	1.26
Agency officials monitor my interviews, either in-person or over the telephone.	345	3.19	.97	135	3.43	1.20
Agencies quickly respond to my requests for information and interviews. (rc)	389	2.59	1.05	136	2.73	.75
The public is not getting all the information it needs because of barriers agencies are imposing on journalists' reporting practices.	379	2.15	.98	134	4.25	.86
I have a positive working relationship with agency public information officers. (rc)	380	2.15	.97	135	2.30	.96
PIO Control (mean of seven above)	409	2.92	.67	136	3.29	.67

Note. Mean responses are on an 5-point scale, with larger numbers indicating greater perceived control by PIOs. Two items are reverse-coded. Cronbach's alpha for seven-item PIO Control scale for local reporters is .80 and .76 for federal reporters.

agencies versus those who cover a mixture of local, state and federal agencies and those who cover primarily federal agencies.

Government PIO Survey

In 2012, the researchers acquired a list of 1,723 email addresses of current and former members of the National Association of Government Communicators. The researchers sent an email message to the PIOs Oct. 10, 2012, and four times more for a month, until Nov. 15, 2012, a timeframe that was interrupted by the East Coast Hurricane Sandy, likely affecting the half of the sample working in Washington, D.C.,

Table 2
Mean of Public Information Officers' Responses to PIO-Control Questions

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I do NOT adhere to set criteria for determining which staff member(s) will be interviewed and whether an interview will be granted. (rc)	126	3.91	2.75
I believe my job is to make sure accurate, positive information from my agency is conveyed to the public.	132	3.74	.50
I monitor interviews to make sure my agency's staff is quoted correctly in stories written from their interview.	126	3.06	.94
I feel it is necessary to supervise or otherwise monitor interviews with members of my agency's staff.	128	2.82	.92
I believe that controlling media coverage of the agency is a very important part of protecting the agency's reputation.	131	2.72	.94
I do not have the authority to release information directly to the media without an internal clearing process.	127	2.41	1.11
My organization requires multiple levels of clearance before information can be released to the media.	127	2.33	1.12
I require at least some reporters to review the quotes they are going to use with me before publishing or airing their stories.	118	1.64	.86
I respond to requests for interviews when it is convenient for me, not within any specific time frame.	130	1.28	.55
PIO Control Scale (mean of nine items above)	132	2.54	1.15

Note. Mean responses are on a 5-point scale, with larger numbers indicating greater perceived control by PIOs. One item is reverse-coded. Cronbach's alpha for nine-item PIO Control scale is .65.

as federal PIOs. In all, 132 people completed the survey fully, for an 8 percent response rate, which is lower than preferred and suggests a need for a follow-up study, but still provides some exploratory data.⁵⁰

Survey Questions

The researchers included 20 questions about their experience with journalists as well as questions about their demographics and jobs (sex, age, race, Hispanic/non-Hispanic, highest degree, years of experience in PR, years of experience in journalism, principle area of study in college, job status and agency type). The researchers also created a nine-item scale to measure "PIO Control" (Cronbach's alpha = .65). The nine questions are listed in Table 2, along with descriptive responses.

Findings

Journalist Perceptions

To address the first research question regarding journalists' perceptions of PIO control and factors related to control, reporters in the national 2014 survey responded to the following statement: "I believe government public information officers have been exercising increasingly tighter controls over the interviewing and reporting process in recent years." The researchers found 45 percent reported they "strongly agree," about 28 percent somewhat agree, 22 percent neither agree nor disagree, and only 5 percent either mildly or strongly disagree. There appeared a perception among reporters nationwide that PIO controls were increasing.

Both reporter surveys included the item, "The public is not getting all the information it needs because of barriers agencies are imposing on journalists' reporting practices." About 85 percent of the federal reporters agreed with the statement and 76 percent of the local reporters agreed with the statement. A strong majority of journalists perceived they are not able to get important information to the public because of PIO controls.

Correlational analysis indicated the strongest factors related to PIO control are the level of agency – those who cover state and federal agencies ($r = .23^{**}$), as well as those who work at larger newspapers ($r = .28^{**}$). Post-hoc analysis indicated younger reporters were more likely to be frustrated ($r = .19^*$), as were Hispanic journalists (1 = Hispanic, 0 = non-Hispanic, $r = .12^*$). Regression analysis indicated the factors remaining significant in relation to frustration of PIO controls were being Hispanic, working at a larger news organization and covering a state or federal agency. [See Table 3]

PIO Perceptions

Next, to address the second research question, how PIOs view their role in working with journalists and factors related to control, the researchers asked PIOs their perceptions about working with reporters. It was apparent PIOs believed an important part of their job is to monitor interviews (77 percent said they monitor interviews to make sure the agency is quoted correctly). Also, 65 percent agreed "controlling media coverage of the agency is a very important part of protecting the agency's reputation."

Additionally, nearly half of the respondents agreed that "There are specific reporters I will not allow my staff to talk to because of the problems with their stories in the past." About 16 percent said they have banned entire news organizations from talking to government employees because of previous reporting. In other words, some PIOs hindered journalists' access to agency employees or blackballed them, depending on the nature of their work.

Correlational analysis indicated PIOs with the least journalism experience were more likely to monitor interviews ($r = .31^*$), younger PIOs were more likely to value controlling media coverage ($r = .28^{**}$), and women PIOs were more likely to defer to authority for clearance before releasing statements to the media ($r = .22^*$). When applying regression analysis, the only factor predicting PIO control was the level of government. Those who work for federal agencies were more likely to have more controlling attitudes than those working in local or state agencies. [See Table 4]

Table 3
Hierarchical OLS Regressions Predicting PIO Control Among Journalists (N = 409)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>β</i>
<i>Block 1: Individual Level</i>			
Gender (male = 0; female = 1)	-.05	.09	-.04
Race (white = 0; non-white = 1)	-.23	.17	-.11
Hispanic (Hispanic = 1; non-Hisp = 0)	-.45	.23	.15*
Age	.00	.01	.00
Experience in journalism	-.03	.01	-.05
Incremental R^2 (%)	2.6%**		
<i>Block 2: Organization Level</i>			
Newspaper size	.15	.04	.23***
Agency size (Local vs. State/Fed)	.41	.11	.23***
Incremental R^2 (%)	11.5%*		
Total R^2 (%)	14.1%		
Total Adjusted R^2 (%)	12.2%		

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Federal PIO Control

To address the hypothesis predicting greater perceived PIO controls at federal levels of government, the greatest friction between journalists and PIOs was indeed at the highest levels of government, followed at the state level, then local. This was found with both reporters and PIOs. As noted in Table 4, following regression analysis, the only factor related to increased control of the media by PIOs was level of government. On the PIO control scale, PIOs at local agencies showed the lowest mean ($M = 2.36$, $SD = .40$), followed by those working for state agencies ($M = 2.40$, $SD = .35$) and then those at federal agencies ($M = 2.77$, $SD = .53$). Analysis of variance indicates the differences were statistically significant, $F(2, 117 = 11.39, p < .001)$.

Further, the researchers assessed whether journalists who work with different levels of government experience differing levels of PIO control. As can be seen in Table 1, in every question the federal reporters reported higher means on PIO controls than did the local reporters.

The researchers looked at this a little deeper by using the 2014 reporter data to compare the means of the PIO Control scale for reporters who cover only local agencies ($M = 2.84$, $SD = .67$), reporters who cover a combination of local, state and federal agencies ($M = 3.20$, $SD = .58$) and reporters who cover only federal agencies ($M = 3.51$, $SD = .81$). Analysis of variance shows the differences are statistically significant, $F(2, 535 = 46.74, p < .001)$, with reporters who cover only federal agencies expressing the most control by PIOs.

Table 4
Hierarchical OLS Regressions Predicting PIO Control Among PIOs (N = 132)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	<i>β</i>
<i>Block 1: Individual Level</i>			
Gender (male = 0; female = 1)	-.03	.12	-.03
Race (white = 0; non-white = 1)	.28	.17	.23
Hispanic (Hispanic = 1; non-Hisp = 0)	.05	.32	.02
Age	-.01	.01	-.12
Education	-.19	.11	-.20
Experience in PR	-.03	.08	-.05
Experience in journalism	.03	.07	.44
Incremental R^2 (%)	13.8%**		
<i>Block 2: Organization Level</i>			
Agency size (Local, State, Federal)	.35	.07	.63***
Incremental R^2 (%)	34.0%*		
Total R^2 (%)	47.8%		
Total Adjusted R^2 (%)	37.0%		

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Not only did PIOs at the federal level report exerting greater controls over the media, but journalists who cover federal agencies reported more frustration and more PIO controls than journalists who cover local government agencies.

Not only did PIOs at the federal level report exerting greater controls over the media, but journalists who cover federal agencies reported more frustration and more PIO controls than did journalists who cover local government agencies.

Discussion

Journalists who cover federal government expressed more frustration of PIO control than did journalists who cover local agencies, and a majority of all journalists reported control tactics becoming more prevalent and inhibiting. Also, journalists who worked at larger news organizations expressed greater frustration, perhaps because they are more likely to cover federal agencies for regional issues than are reporters at small community news organizations. The study also found PIOs at federal agencies are more likely to express more restrictive press policies than are PIOs at state or local agencies. These findings support the perceptions of journalists of increased excessive information control by the Obama Administration.

The researchers found individual-level factors have relatively little influence on the ability for journalists to serve their gatekeeping role, as suggested by Shoemaker and Reese's hierarchical model of news influences. External forces, such as the level of government and size of news organization, serve a greater role than do demographics on information dissemination, for both journalists and public relations practitioners.

The findings did suggest younger PIOs tend to value greater controls over journalists than do older and more experienced PIOs. These younger PIOs tend to favor the controlling practices espoused by the *Media Relations Handbook for Government, Associations, Nonprofits and Elected Officials*, where public relations practitioners are instructed to train their spokespersons to espouse the agency's message, to monitor and record interviews and try to obtain questions in advance.⁵¹ This needs further attention to examine whether it has always been the case that younger PIOs favor greater controls or whether a cohort effect is developing with an up-and-coming generation more controlling of information and the press. That could also serve as a possible explanation for why journalists perceive a trend toward increased PIO controls.

The findings also suggest implications for the media's agenda-building process and practices for PIOs. If government public relations practitioners feel they should apply more aggressive methods in controlling information, such as prohibiting employees from speaking, monitoring interviews and requiring questions to be submitted in advance, this could lead to greater influence in story idea generation and sourcing by PIOs. Information critical of the government might be less likely to come to light, and citizens might be left in the dark and ill-prepared to make informed decisions at the polls. Ultimately, the United States could experience a gradual shift toward reduced press freedom and increased government propaganda endured in other nations.

Perhaps greater frustration and anger by journalists could actually result in a backlash against PIOs and their ability to influence media agenda building. For example, Len-Rios et al. found journalists more skeptical of PIOs are less likely to use press releases for story ideas and sourcing.⁵² The perceived increase by journalists in aggressive PIO tactics might create a greater schism between journalists and PIOs, particularly in Washington, D.C., where political polarization and distrust run deep. These tactics might actually work against PIO interests and the agencies that employ them.

Limitations

Survey-based studies can indicate correlations but are limited in determining causation. This study does not provide answers for *why* PIO controls might be increasing – just that journalists perceive an increase. Also, perception is not always reality. Longitudinal studies would be helpful in examining these dynamics over time to more accurately assess change.

Also, surveys always are limited in their generalizability. Relatively low response rates raise the question of whether those who responded have a specific axe to grind and skew reality. For example, perhaps the journalists who responded to the surveys were motivated because they have had difficult encounters with PIOs. Growing research indicates low response rates do not necessarily harm findings of a study,⁵³ but higher participation would be preferable. The researchers view this study as exploratory, and more surveys and interview-based research should be conducted.

Future Research

Further studies could examine whether actual news *content* is changing, particularly at the federal level, because of increased influence by PIOs. This could have significant implications for the kind of information the public receives and could contribute to agenda setting.

It is also unclear exactly why PIO controls might be gaining strength, particularly at the federal level. This merits more examination. Perhaps it has something to do with the Obama Administration, although the same study conducted in every president's term might have yielded similar results. Perhaps the nature of large bureaucracies or political appointees at the federal level contribute to more heavy-handed information control. Integration of political science theory might lead to fruitful studies on this subject. At minimum, further research using interviews and observation might identify ways for the press to counter these tactics or for policymakers to step in and effect real change toward true transparency and government accountability.

This is also an area worthy of examination by media law scholars. Typically, the focus in legal research is on existing statutes and case law, but there are no U.S. statutes requiring government officials to talk to journalists. Might these growing PIO controls have First Amendment implications? The Bill of Rights states, "Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom... of the press." Typically, "Congress" has been interpreted as all forms of government and "law" has been interpreted broadly (e.g., agency policies cannot supersede statutes). Therefore, if government agencies create policies that prevent the press from getting information (e.g., prohibiting government employees from speaking), is that not government abridging freedom of the press? Other countries have started to address this issue in their statutes. The Kyrgyz Republic, for example, passed a national freedom of information law in 2006 that includes a section requiring public agencies to supply journalists the information they request and to reward government employees who do so.⁵⁴

Conclusion

This exploratory study indicates government public information officers appeared during this timeframe to exert more control over what information journalists gather for the public, and this control was strongest at the federal level. The journalist's traditional role of "gatekeeper" could be weakening as government officials identify other avenues for communicating with the public, including direct online communications and dispersed niche publications. Add to that the growth of governmental tactics to manage the message, and it is not just journalists who are under siege but the very nature of democracy and the people's ability to hold their government accountable.

Notes

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48. All were full-time journalists working for news media organizations except for one part-time reporter and six freelancers. One-third worked for wire services, a third for large newspapers, and the rest for smaller media outlets, including weekly and mid- size daily newspapers. The respondents covered a variety of federal agencies, including the military, courts, environment, White House and executive departments. The group was relatively experienced, with only 10 percent possessing less than three years' experience, 21 percent three to 10 years, a third 11 to 20 years, and a third more than 20 years. About two-thirds were male and 89 percent were white, which mirrors demographics of journalists nationally.

49. About 93 percent were employed as full-time journalists working for news organizations, and the rest were part-time or freelance journalists. About 15 percent worked for large daily newspapers, 15 percent mid-sized dailies, and 24 percent small dailies. The other 46 percent worked for television, radio, magazines, wire services, online-only publications and other publications. The years of journalism experience ranged from 1 to 54 years, with a median of 17 years, and the median age was 42. Half were female and 87 percent white.
50. About 90 percent were employed as full-time public relations practitioners in a government office, and the rest were part-time or had related positions. A third worked for federal agencies, 17 percent worked for state agencies, and the rest for local government. The group was relatively experienced, with 40 percent having more than 20 years PR experience and a third having 10-20 years in the business. Also, 54 percent had experience working as a journalist, with 57 percent of those with less than five years in journalism. The average age was 50, about 62 percent were female, and 90 percent reported themselves as white.
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