

MEDIATED ACCESS:

JOURNALISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF FEDERAL PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

MEDIA CONTROL

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Society of Professional Journalists¹

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SUMMARY

On the eve of Sunshine Week 2012, a survey of journalists who cover federal agencies found that information flow in the United States is highly regulated by public affairs officers, to the point where most reporters considered the control to be a form of censorship and an impediment to providing information to the public. According to a survey of 146 reporters who cover federal agencies, conducted by the Society of Professional Journalists in February 2012, journalists indicated that public information officers often require pre-approval for interviews, prohibit interviews of agency employees, and often monitor interviews. Journalists overwhelmingly agreed with the statement that “the public was not getting all the information it needs because of barriers agencies are imposing on journalists’ reporting practices.”

¹ This study was sponsored by the Society of Professional Journalists. Dr. Carolyn Carlson is an assistant professor at Kennesaw State University and a former president of SPJ. Dr. David Cuillier is director of the School of Journalism at the University of Arizona and is SPJ secretary-treasurer. Both serve on the SPJ Freedom of Information Committee. Lindsay Tulkoff is a graduate assistant at Kennesaw State University.

STUDY SAMPLE

The survey was conducted online Jan. 23, 2012 through Feb. 24, 2012. A sample of 776 reporters identified by the Society of Professional Journalists as covering federal agencies were e-mailed an initial message and six follow-up messages over the course of a month to recruit them to take the survey. In all, 146 respondents (19 percent) completed the survey. Ninety-five percent (n=139) were full-time journalists, one was part-time and six were freelancers. Almost all were reporters (91.2%, n=134), eight were editors, one was an online producer and four had other positions. The largest number worked for wire services (32.2%, n=47) and the next largest worked for large newspapers (31.5%, n=46), while the rest were scattered among smaller media outlets, with the third largest being weekly and mid-size daily newspapers with 13 each (8.9%).

A third of the journalists said their beat was politics (32.2%, n=47), while 21 said their beat was business (14.4%) and 13 said it was law enforcement or the courts (8.9%). A handful said they covered education (n=4, 2.7%), science/health (n=5, 3.4%) or the environment (n=5, 3.4%). The largest number said their beat was general assignment or some other beat (34.9%, n=51). More than two thirds of the respondents had more than 10 years reporting experience (11 to 20 years, 34.4%, n=50, 21 or more 36.1%, n=53), while the rest had less than 10 years experience (3 to 10 years, 20.4%, n=30, less than 3, 9.5%, n=14). Twenty-seven percent (n=37, 27.2%) said they covered the military or the various national security-related agencies; 20.6 percent said they covered either the White House or Congress (n=28), 45.6 percent said they covered some other Cabinet department or federal agency, while eight reporters said they covered all agencies (5.9%).

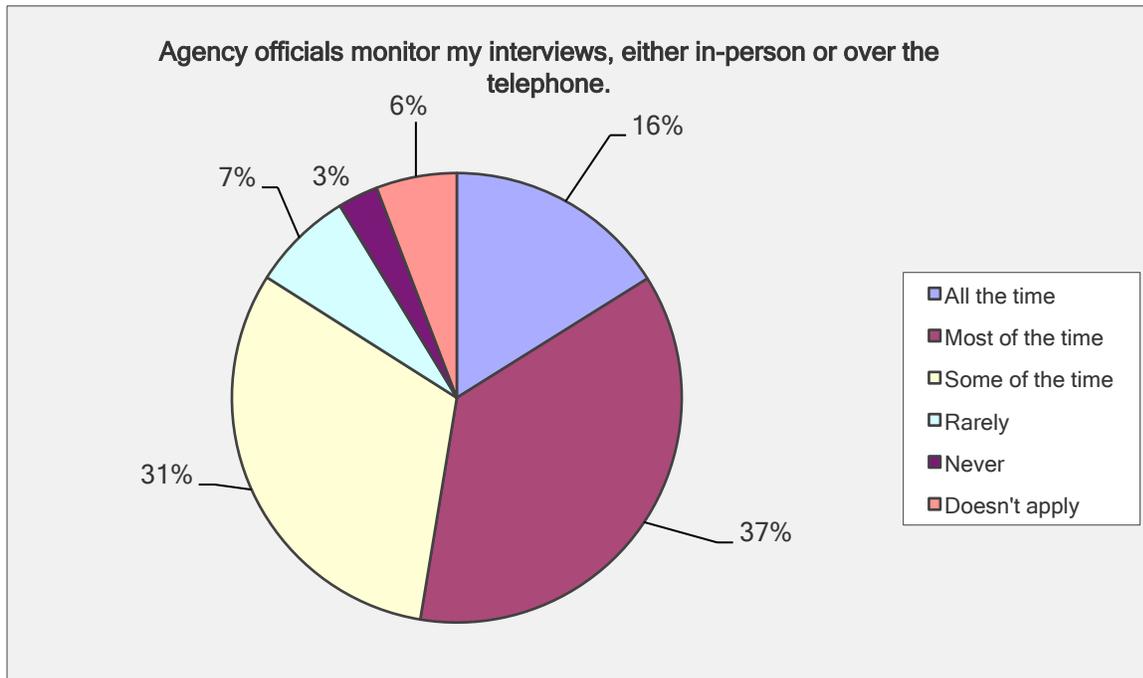
The margin of error of the study is plus or minus 7 percent.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

The surveyed journalists overwhelmingly reported barriers to getting information because of federal agencies controlling interviews. In particular:

- **Pre-approval:** Three-quarters reported that they have to get approval from public affairs officers before interviewing an agency employee (a third said that occurs all of the time and 45 percent some of the time).
- **Prohibition:** About half the reporters said agencies outright prohibit reporters from interviewing agency employees altogether at least some of the time, and 18 percent said it happens most of the time.

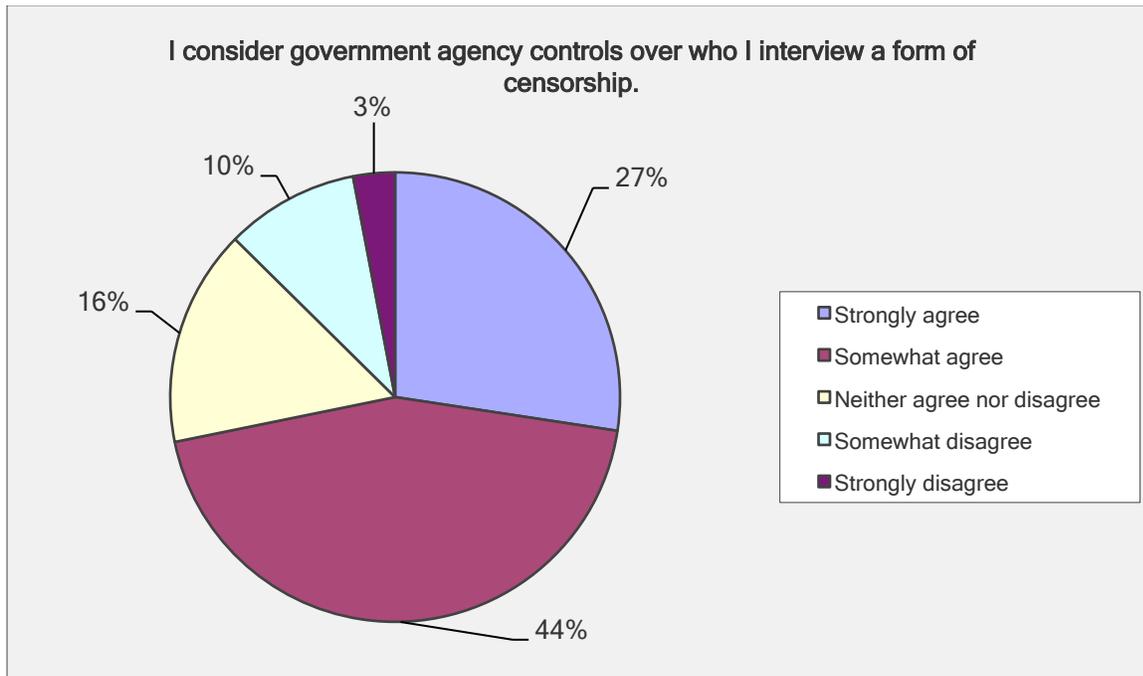
- Routing:** Seven out of 10 reporters say their requests for interviews are forwarded to public affairs officers for selective routing to whomever they want (23.2%, n=23 all the time, 43.5%, n=60 most of the time).
- Monitoring:** About 16 percent of the reporters said their interviews are monitored in person or over the telephone all the time, a third said it happens most of the time and another third said it happens some of the time. “They often sit in on interviews, though rarely does a PIO interject questions or comments,” said one respondent. But another respondent said, “They sit right next to the person I am interviewing and often times jump in to make a comment or interfere with the conversation.” One reporter said, “They will sit in the interviews, often recording them to check against whatever I write (which is not a bad idea on their part).”



- Avoidance:** More than half of the reporters said that they tried to circumvent the public affairs office at least some of the time (54.7%, n=75). Nineteen reporters (13.9%) said they avoided the public affairs officers altogether, going straight to the agency employees without the PAO consent, but only two reporters (1.5%) said they did that all the time.

On the other hand, 33 reporters said they rarely circumvented the public affairs office (24.1%) and two reporters said they never did (1.5%).

- **Censorship:** Seven out of 10 reporters agreed with the statement: “I consider government agency controls over who I interview a form of censorship” (27.4% n=37 strongly agree, 44.4%, n=60 somewhat agree). Twenty one reporters (15.6%) neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement and the rest disagreed (9.6%, n=13 somewhat disagree, 3.0% n=4 strongly disagree).



- **Public hurt:** About 85 percent of the journalists agreed with the statement that “The public is not getting the information it needs because of barriers agencies are imposing on journalists’ reporting practices” (47.1% n=64 strongly agree, 38.2% n=52 somewhat agree). Only 13 neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement (9.6%), while seven disagreed with the statement (4.4% n=6 somewhat disagree, .7%, n=1 strongly disagreed).
- **Positive relationships:** Despite the complaints, most of the reporters said they had a positive relationship with their PAOs and PIOs (15.5%, n=21 strongly agree, 54.8%, n=74 somewhat agree). There were some who were neutral (23 neither agreed nor disagreed (17%) and the rest disagreed with the statement that they had a positive

relationship with their agency's PIO (8.9%, n=12 somewhat disagreed, 3.7%, n=5 strongly disagreed).

- **Response time:** Five reporters (3.6%) strongly agreed with the statement “agencies quickly respond to my requests for information and interviews” and a third said this was true most of the time (33.3%, n=46). Half said this was true only some of the time (49.3%, n=68), with the rest saying it happened only rarely (13.8%, n=19).
- **Open-ended comments:** Of those respondents who chose to make open-ended comments, the largest number (44%, n=24) indicated they thought public affairs officers control too much information, while 12 reporters (22%) that PAOs fail to furnish actual information. Comments included:
 - “PAOs tend to make up information. You can never trust the information they provide. They make our jobs almost impossible and they treat journalists with barely any professionalism.”
 - “They act as gatekeepers. And they are very rarely completely helpful or forthcoming.”
 - “Most PIOs are great. But what can you do about the duds or jerks?”

SURVEY QUESTIONS

I am required to obtain approval from the agency public information officer before interviewing agency employees.

All the time	43	31%
Most of the time	62	45%
Some of the time	21	15%
Rarely	3	2%
Never	8	6%
Doesn't apply	8	6%

I have been prohibited by an agency from interviewing agency employees.

All the time	4	3%
Most of the time	25	18%
Some of the time	66	48%
Rarely	23	17%
Never	10	7%
Doesn't apply	10	7%

My requests for interviews are forwarded to public affairs officers for selective routing to whomever they want.

All the time	32	23%
Most of the time	60	44%
Some of the time	27	20%
Rarely	8	6%
Never	3	2%
Doesn't apply	8	6%

Agency officials monitor my interviews, either in-person or over the telephone.

All the time	22	16%
Most of the time	50	37%
Some of the time	43	31%
Rarely	10	7%
Never	4	3%
Doesn't apply	8	6%

Agencies quickly respond to my requests for information and interviews.

All the time	5	4%
Most of the time	46	33%
Some of the time	68	49%
Rarely	19	14%
Never	0	0%
Doesn't apply	0	0%

I avoid public information officers altogether, circumventing them and going straight to agency employees without the PIO's consent.

All the time	2	2%
Most of the time	19	14%
Some of the time	75	55%
Rarely	33	24%
Never	2	2%
Doesn't apply	6	4%

I consider government agency controls over who I interview a form of censorship.

Strongly agree	37	27%
Somewhat agree	60	44%
Neither agree nor disagree	21	16%

Somewhat disagree	13	10%
Strongly disagree	4	3%

The public is not getting all the information it needs because of barriers agencies are imposing on journalists' reporting practices.

Strongly agree	64	47%
Somewhat agree	52	38%
Neither agree nor disagree	13	10%
Somewhat disagree	6	4%
Strongly disagree	1	1%

I have a positive working relationship with agency public information officers.

Strongly agree	21	15%
Somewhat agree	75	55%
Neither agree nor disagree	24	18%
Somewhat disagree	12	9%
Strongly disagree	5	4%

RESEARCHERS

The survey was conducted by Dr. Carolyn S. Carlson, an assistant professor of communication at Kennesaw State University in Kennesaw, Ga., and Dr. David Cuillier, Director of the School of Journalism at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Ariz., on behalf of the Society of Professional Journalists Freedom of Information Committee, of which both are members. Dr. Cuillier is a former chairman of the FOI committee and is currently secretary-treasurer of the Society of Professional Journalists. Dr. Carlson is a former national president of the Society of Professional Journalists. The project was undertaken to mark Sunshine Week 2012, March 11-17, celebrating Your Right To Know. The Society of Professional Journalists comprises 8,000 members nationwide.

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