

## **Carolyn Carlson's NPC presentation 3/19/14**

In the past five months I've conducted two surveys of reporters to find out their opinions on their relationship with government public information officers. The first survey was with 190 journalist members of the Education Writers Association. That survey was in the field for three weeks in late October and early November. The second was with 445 reporters identified as covering local and state governments, police and courts, general assignment, or other beats that deal with government PIOs. The second survey took place just a few weeks ago, from late January through mid-February. Both surveys were conducted online. The margin of error on the EWA survey was 6.7 percent; the margin of error on the local reporters survey was 4.6 percent.

I'm not going to bombard you with a lot of numbers at this point. You can get the precise figures from the reports. But here are some of my impressions from the surveys.

The findings were remarkably similar on the questions the two surveys had in common.

PIOs are generally good at responding to requests for information within the reporters' deadline, although some of the time it takes multiple requests to get the information they need. The reporters overwhelmingly say their interviews have to be approved by the PIOs ahead of the time, at least some of the time. Two-thirds of the reporters in both surveys say their requests for interviews with agency employees are forwarded to the PIOs who then route the requests to whomever they want. When they get to the interview, often the PIOs are there too – either monitoring the interview in person or if it's a telephone interview, they're there on the phone as well.

More than half of the local reporters say they have been prohibited from interviewing agency employees at least some of the time, sometimes as a routine matter of policy – nobody but the agency head and the PIO are allowed to speak to the press – and sometimes because the PIO is unhappy with stories the reporter has done. Among the education writers, only about a quarter say they've been prohibited from interviewing educators at times, usually for the same reasons.

Because of the roadblocks to interviews, three-fourths of the local reporters and more than half of the education writers say they will sometimes work around the public information offices and contact sources directly without the PIOs permission or knowledge.

When asking for public records, only two-thirds of the reporters in both surveys said they actually received the records within the time frame required by their state law. And of those who got their records, only one-half to two-thirds said they got the information they asked for. About a quarter of those who got records say they only "sort of" got the information they were asking for – either it was incomplete, or vague or so redacted it was useless.

About 60 to 70 percent of the time, the custodians of the records would answer questions about the records they provided. The rest of them either wouldn't answer questions at all, or they'd give vague answers or prepared statements that didn't help much.

Despite these issues, both groups said they had a positive working relationship with the PIOs they deal with.

More than three-fourths of the local reporters and 76 percent of the education writers agreed with the statement that they believed the public was "not getting the information it needs because of barriers agencies are imposing on journalists' reporting practices."

Sixty percent of the education writers agreed with the statement that the controls imposed on the reporting process constituted "a form of government censorship."

The local reporters were asked about the trends of PIO efforts at media control. Seventy-three percent agreed that PIOs had "been exercising increasingly tighter controls over the interviewing and reporting process in recent years." And this was the opinion of a fairly experienced group of reporters – the average number of years of experience of the respondents was 18 years.

The local reporters also were asked whether they thought the degree of government control over the interviewing and reporting process should increase, decrease or stay the same over the next five years. More than 83 percent said it would increase and only 2 percent said it would decrease, with the rest saying it was stay the same.

I want to thank the Society of Professional Journalists and the Education Writers Association for their help in making these surveys come about. Both groups provided me with the lists I used for the two surveys.

Now I'll let the president of SPJ and the spokeswoman for EWA tell you what they think these results mean.