

Statement at Event on Press Offices' Control of the Press

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Censorship is one of the most pernicious things that can happen in human societies, no matter what you call it, the legal basis for it is, or even the original intent in creating it.

It's not just unethical. It's drastically handicapping, muddling to people's understanding and capabilities for solving problems. Information control has been foundational for most of the horrific events in human history.

Over about the last 20 years agencies and organizations have brought about a surge of policies of blocking reporters from ever communicating to staff unless they are tracked and/or monitored by the public affairs officers: the public relations controllers.

This is powerful, mean censorship that's now a cultural norm. On an historical basis it's new and it's radical. It is driven by the same motivations and has the same impact as censorship everywhere.

Built on top of the mandate forcing reporter to notify "the authorities," are myriad the other barriers including delays, outright denials, demands for questions in writing, etc.

It shuts staff people up totally about so many things that are the public's business. It prevents reporters from doing what is only due diligence: finding out if the story looks different, which it frequently does, when people aren't guarded at the behest of the bosses.

I estimate it has meant at least a 90 percent blockage for many specialized reporters' in terms of contact with federal staff, with the exceptions meetings and press conferences.

And, reporters, if you go through the PIOs most of the time, there is so much you don't know it's beyond dangerous.

The gravediggers at Arlington Cemetery knew about the jumbled graves for years, janitors at Penn State knew about the child abuse for years; last year reports said an EPA executive assistant suspected when a high official was repeatedly absent over 13 years, while saying he was, incredibly, on assignment with the CIA.

Meanwhile people in power are adamant they must have the right to silence people.

Mandating silence is as immoral as the worst of the many things it will hide.

I hope you will read the op-ed by David Cuillier and Angela Grieling Keane in the Sunshine Week Toolbox.

Carolyn Carlson's prior surveys have shown, among other things, that most journalists covering federal agencies consider these type barriers censorship that keeps information from the public and that 40 percent of PIOs admit to blocking specific reporters because they had "problems" with the reporters' previous stories.

Today the Society of Professional Journalists, the National Press Club and the Educational Writers Association join in presenting two more surveys by Dr. Carlson which are groundbreaking because they are the first to look at this on a national basis. They really show how entrenched and pervasive this controlling culture has become while we haven't even been telling the public about it.

We have with us: Carolyn Carlson, communication professor from Kennesaw State University and leader of the two new surveys

Emily Richmond, the Education Writers Association Public Editor

David Cuillier, President of the Society of Professional Journalists and director of the University of Arizona School of Journalism.