

**Remarks by Kathryn Foxhall, freelance health and medical reporter, at the
National Academy of Sciences**

**Sustainable Infrastructures for Life Science Communication: A Workshop
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Public Affairs Offices and Transparency in Federal Agencies

MS. FOXHALL: Thank you. I am pleased to be here. I really want to thank the NAS for inviting me on this important subject.

Over about the last 20 years, agencies and organizations have brought on a surge of policies of blocking reports from communicating to staff unless they are tracked and/or monitored by public affairs officers, the public relations controllers. This is powerful, mean censorship that is now a cultural norm. It often comes from the same motivations and it does have the same impact as censorship everywhere. This has created a situation for reporting that is drastically constrained from prior times when reporters walked agencies halls and/or called staff members at will in a unique, critically needed graduate school talked to and got to know staff, got stories, perspective, education fluidly. This is dynamic stuff just like this was the United States or something.

Now, in contrast, I estimate that at least for specialized reporters the contact with and education of journalists in many federal agencies is down over 90 percent. Due to "PR office censorship," we can't chat and we can't get to know people. But at least as important, reporters and staff members can't speak candidly without guards on them.

Reporters have reasons to be horrified. For example, in the terrible first years after AIDS was identified I was on the phone with a well-placed CDC scientist. One would think that with a fatal epidemic exploding we could be urgently honest with each other, but not so. The political administration wanted to cut programs, and I was asking about proposed user fees for lab tests. The CDC person gave me the official story for 30 minutes saying everything was fine. But this was year before CDC instituted PR office censorship. No one knew he and I were talking, typical of that time. So, I said, "Doctor, is there something you could tell me if your name weren't attached to it." He exploded. It was like a light being switched on in a dark cave. He told me why people were going to die and how it related to AIDS. Just as importantly, he told me how the system worked, which was public information, but which I did not have the time to ferret out and congress did not understand it either. I want to stress this, had he been tracked by the PR office like today he would have stuck to the official story which as completely accurate and completely misleading and muddling for the 30,000 public health professionals I wrote for. That article would have been the moral equivalent of throwing barriers in front of first responders. I would not have realized it until today.

Gary Pruitt, president of the Associated Press says, "Nonofficial news sources are critical to the free press and critical for holding government accountable. Otherwise, you are just going to hear the official sources from the official sources and then the public will only know what the government wants them to know."

A survey by Dr. Caroline Carlson sponsored by the Society of Professional Journalists found recently that 71 percent of Washington journalists said the controls over who they talked to in government agencies are censorship and 85 percent of those journalists felt the restrictions keep information away from the public.

On an ordinary, everyday basis, the official story is a shoebox. Everything that the public would be interested in is this building.

The widespread use of these barriers is new on a historic basis, and it is radical. On the federal level, for example, most agencies prior to the last two administrations did nothing like this. HHS actually states

that it must monitor contacts in order to coordinate the response. When have Americans *ever* indicated they want their information limited to what is coordinated by officials. We have locked journalists into this one area, this one set of a few people to go through. That is real power over journalists.

Reporters are forced to do permission seeking for every 2 minute conversation and that alone with sabotage almost any enterprise. Then, because agencies usually only have a few public affairs officers, they become a tiny bottleneck between all reporters and the thousands of people they *should* be talking with for the sake of our understandings and capabilities as a society. There are often days of delay. One thing we do know is that our conversations often must be cleared with the political layer of government.

These controls have exploded in aggressiveness. Sometimes the PAOs just don't let us speak to the person we requested or to anyone. If the agency does grant permission to speak, monitors usually listen in. During the interview, the PAO may limit what may be said and may actually stop the source person from discussing something. This is a process of telling scientists and professionals and the American public to take a hike.

Earlier this year I was reporting on important rules for clinicaltrials.gov. The rules had not come out, although congress had called for them five years previously. FDA and NIH just said no. No one would talk to me. They got real offended when I persisted. Note here, reporters must go back to those same offices for permission for a future story. So, if we know what is good for our paycheck, we take what little they give us, toxic to the public understanding though it may be, and live to interview another day.

In another survey, Dr. Carlson found that 40 percent of public affairs officers admitted they had blocked certain reporters because of "problems" the PAOs had with the reporter's previous stories. HHS PAO informed a room full of reporters that he had told his entire staff to ignore a certain reporter.

There is no inherent limit to the seriousness of what censorship can hide. For example, much of the medical research ethics today flow from the reaction in the 1972 when we found out the public health service had experimented on 399 African-American men for 40 years, not treating them for syphilis and not informing them what was happening. The only thing that finally brought the Tuskegee experiment to an end: the totally unauthorized conversations of an insider, in that case a former CDC employee with a reporter. Totally unauthorized conversations.

Well, agencies have learned their lesson. Today, the Office of Human Research Protection is dealing with one of the most prominent research ethics issues in years. It has its PR guard and it is not reporters talk to anyone.

To save our lives and our integrity, the press needs gushing rivers of unauthorized communications, confidential conversations, discussions the bosses would never, ever approve of, and talks with as many of the "wrong people" as possible.

The agency leaders say they must monitor reporters because what people tell us might be wrong. Yes, people speaking freely may be wrong. They may have their own agenda. Critical to reporters work, is being highly skeptical in confirming everything. But, there is no more hazardous information source than the official story. It is usually not the whole story, and it is frequently politically induced or self-promoting for the agency or the leaders. But, with these policies of tracking contacts, leaders prevent journalists from doing what is simply due diligence, finding out if the story is different when people don't have surveillance on them.

Free speech with its capability of bringing things to light is the great inducer of accuracy.

Arlington gravediggers knew about the John Doe grave for years before the story broke. Janitors knew about the child abuse at Penn State for years. Would to God that a janitor had found himself sitting next to a reporter at a Penn State football game and some level of trust had developed. The last thing anybody should want is for any employee to be warned to never talk to the press, or to never talk without

guards. That is one of the most very serious points. These restrictions just intimidate speech at thousands of points day in and day out. Whatever the original reasoning, the leaders, themselves, who institute these restrictions can't have any inkling of all of the various exchanges they squelch. Don't use your power to silence people. It is beyond the pale ethically.

I would point out that although we use the contentious stories to illustrate the gravity of these restrictions, actually the majority of what is blocked by bogging down the process is noncontroversial education that no one would object to –some of the stuff that is being talked about here today. And I would bet with many agencies huge numbers of contacts don't occur because reporters don't initiate them nearly as often anymore. Journalists just can't continue to try things that don't work.

PR office censorship is now all over the country. Local and state governments, businesses, schools, hospitals and even some universities have the silence policies. Millions of people and thousands of workplaces of varying moral caliber are in essence told to be silent. A Utah editor talks about public affairs officers not only blocking her reporters, but also demanding she give them a list of future stories the newspaper was working and to fire a reporter they didn't like.

Education reporters from several states laughed when the subject was brought up, indicating they are stopped at every turn. I was sent a template of a policy used by a number of schools that said only the top people in schools could talk to the press. Over the last few years we have all of these histories coming out that institutions protected child abuse for years, and now we have all of these schools telling personnel never to talk to reporters. You do not want to live in a community where staff, government, police, schools and hospitals are prohibited to get to know reporters or tip them off about anything.

Specifically about science communication, the conflict of interest is indefensible when people or organizations control or manipulate the information gathering about them. True informed consent in research on humans is not possible if the organizations that do the research, fund it or set the parameters for it are silencing people.

What should organizations do? Allow public affairs professionals to do their job of getting the word out and don't tie them up with forcibly tracking reporters. List your experts on your websites with extensive descriptions of their expertise. Give their direct contact information and let them talk to reporters. They are usually better than you think. Put out news release and comprehensive statements. Be there for reporters to get the official story.

Don't get me wrong, it is important for reporters to get the official coordinated side of the story. Put experts contact information on the releases. If a reporter gets something wrong *do* contact the publications. Reporters really get very little responsible feedback. If you, or a scientist, or anyone else is working under PR office censorship please don't put up with it. Your freedom to speak is critically important to the rest of us.

Thanks.