



Society of Environmental Journalists

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June 12, 2014

Mr. Reynolds,

Thanks for your written response to the letter of June 5 that we issued on behalf of the board and members of the Society of Environmental Journalists.

In reviewing it carefully, we conclude that you missed out on our main point. We are writing again in an effort to help you understand the problem that was caused by the recent "background briefing" and the change we seek in this agency practice.

We appreciate the statement that you at EPA "are committed to an open and productive relationship with the press." How can we establish conditions for such a relationship to develop? As a start, we trust that you will give the following comments sincere consideration, as befits our shared public service goals for an informed democracy.

We urge you consider the difference between (1) Administrator McCarthy doing interviews with high-profile media outlets, to disseminate information on the Clean Power Plan at places and times of the agency's choosing, and (2) unfettered reporter access to issue experts who could answer technical questions of the sort many SEJ members were asking the day of the announcement, on the record, with attribution to a credible named source.

Because of the "on background" practice in effect that day, the one briefing on the Clean Power Plan that was open to any journalist, for listening in and asking questions, was not for attribution therefore essentially worthless for hundreds of journalists preparing specific stories that day for specific audiences. Editorial policies at many news outlets forbid or discourage the use of unnamed sources.

EPA should rarely if ever hold a "background briefing" by un-named officials, and certainly not in conjunction with an important news event. Public communications are public communications. To hold a press conference where the speakers are anonymous is a contradiction in terms -- and suggests an agency lacks confidence in the competence and accountability of the speakers.

In your letter, you justified the background briefing by saying it was "intended to provide reporters with the opportunity to ask specific technical questions regarding the details of the proposal." That is exactly what journalists, also, want regarding many EPA activities. But it is not, for the most part, what we have been getting.

*Strengthening the quality, reach and viability of journalism across all media
to advance public understanding of environmental issues*

A short and constrained briefing means a short and constrained “opportunity” to ask questions. Journalists attempt constantly to ask questions of agency experts, and too often find the press office, guided by political appointees, interposing itself and providing empty and evasive answers. Or journalists on a short daily deadline find that interviews delayed are interviews denied.

We appreciate the effort that EPA staff and Administrator McCarthy invested in arranging and doing interviews with the media outlets you listed, and we applaud plans you have noted for other events. These have value.

But stopping there, with only a “background briefing” for everyone else, was a counterproductive strategy. We want you to understand that this was a missed opportunity of enormous proportions, for the agency, for journalists, and for readers, viewers, and listeners who have questions of their own.

As we ask for your understanding of journalistic imperatives, we invite you to help us with our own understanding of EPA’s approach. Why did you handle the briefing that way? What reason would you have for holding it “on background?” What is the benefit to the public of this approach? Is EPA willing to change this approach? Why should press conferences with clearly identified speakers not be televised live, as many have been for decades?

In addition, we urge you to consider that the social media activities which you characterize as "engagement" with the public do not actually constitute or qualify as “transparency” or “access.” You should understand that all journalists, and most Americans as well, realize that the agency’s blog, social media events, Twitter feed and similar one-way initiatives, represent a public relations strategy, an efficient way to promote talking points.

Social media efforts should never be confused with “access,” “transparency,” or “open government” behavior. This may be difficult to understand. We are happy to discuss the difference and the hallmarks of each in more depth at another time.

A key difference you may want to understand is that between one-way and two-way communication.

President Obama's Saturday radio address and Administrator McCarthy's Monday televised remarks are examples of one-way communication. A press conference, live or via telephone, can be nearly one-way when time and questions are limited. We understand that government public affairs staff view one-way communication as a preferred way to achieve message control.

But you also may understand that reporters are rarely satisfied to be mere stenographers, and that professional standards of duty do not allow them merely to reprint press releases. The challenges of an open and unconstrained question-and-answer format are much likelier to produce information and understanding.

We welcome the opportunity to help create conditions for the “open and productive relationship with the press” you reference in your letter.

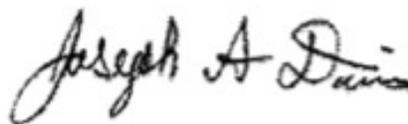
Toward that end, when can SEJ leadership meet with you and the Administrator to discuss the issues SEJ members continue to raise about agency practices and their difficulty gaining on-the-record access to EPA scientists and officials, crucial to the quality and accuracy of important stories they are reporting?

On behalf of the board and members of the Society of Environmental Journalists we respectfully request a written response to concerns and questions hereby expressed.

Sincerely,



Beth Parke
Executive Director
Society of Environmental Journalists



Joseph A. Davis, PhD
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