

Watchdog group issues damning report on Obama administration's war on journalists and whistleblowers

By Thomas Gaist
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The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) issued 30-page report October 10, titled “The Obama Administration and the Press,” describing the punitive treatment meted out by the administration against critics and whistleblowers. It details policies enacted by the administration which block access to government sources by journalists and describes the intimidating effect of the NSA surveillance programs on possible sources.

The report also covers the “manipulative use of administration-controlled media to circumvent scrutiny by the press” under the Open Government Initiative launched by the administration.

According to Leonard Downie Jr., professor of journalism at Arizona State University, and co-author of the report with Sara Rafsky, “The administration’s war on leaks and other efforts to control information are the most aggressive I’ve seen since the Nixon administration, when I was one of the editors involved in *The Washington Post*’s investigation of Watergate. The 30 experienced Washington journalists at a variety of news organizations whom I interviewed for this report could not remember any precedent.”

Downie’s report contains testimony from numerous figures in the media establishment, most of whom offered severe criticisms of the administration’s handling of press relations. Margaret Sullivan, public editor at the *New York Times*, described the administration’s policies as based on “unprecedented secrecy and unprecedented attacks on a free press.”

Rajiv Chandrasekaran, a reporter for the *Washington Post* and member of the CPJ, spoke about the “chilling effect created across government on matters that are less sensitive but certainly in the public interest... It

serves to shield and obscure the business of government from necessary accountability.”

Ellen Weiss, who heads E.W. Scripps Washington bureau, affirmed that “the Obama administration is far worse than the Bush administration” in its treatment of those who expose wrongdoing by government agencies.

Frank Senso, previously the Washington bureau chief for CNN, said that the Obama administration has been “squeezing the flow of information at several pressure points.” Regarding Obama’s Open Government Initiative, Senso said that the administration sees social media as a means “to end run the news media completely.”

Bob Schieffer of CBS told Downie that the Obama administration’s policies are the culmination of decades of development, with each successive administration covering its activities in a thicker blanket of secrecy than the last. “When I’m asked what is the most manipulative and secretive administration I’ve covered, I always say it’s the one in office now,” he said. “Every administration learns from the previous administration. They become more secretive and put tighter clamps on information. This administration exercises more control than George W. Bush’s did, and his before that.”

Summing up a sentiment attributed by Downie to numerous reporters with whom he spoke, Josh Meyer of *Quartz* said, “In the Obama administration, there is across-the-board hostility to the media.” Speaking for *Politico*, Josh Gerstein said of the administration, “If the story is basically one that they don’t want to come out, they won’t even give you the basic facts.”

Downie’s report exposes the “Insider Threat

Program” (ITP) being put into place by the Obama administration. In essence, the ITP requires government employees to spy on their colleagues in order to protect against future leaks of classified material like that carried out by NSA contractor Edward Snowden. According to Steven Aftergood of the Federation of American Scientists’ Government Secrecy Project, the program has “created internal surveillance, heightened a degree of paranoia in government and made people conscious of contacts with the public, advocates, and the press.”

The report also documents the use of government-controlled web sites and social media by the administration in its efforts to shape public perceptions without having to enlist the aid of the press corps. Upon gaining the presidency, Obama oversaw the establishment of the “Open Government Initiative,” which was supposed to make more information available to the public through the establishment of state-run web sites and social media.

As Downie writes in the report, however, “The government websites turned out to be part of a strategy, honed during Obama’s presidential campaign, to use the Internet to dispense to the public large amounts of favorable information and images generated by his administration, while limiting its exposure to probing by the press.” *Politico* described the Open Government Initiative as reflecting a “new technique” based on the creation of web content. “They are obsessed with taking advantage of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and every other social media forum, not just for campaigning, but governing,” he said.

The Downie report comes as the latest in a series of exposures of the deeply anti-democratic policies of the Obama administration. Last May, for instance, the Justice Department admitted to spying on at least 20 telephone lines used by the Associated Press to communicate with sources, in violation of First Amendment protection of freedom of the press. AP President Gary Pruitt subsequently said that, “The chilling effect is not just at AP, it’s happening at other news organizations as well. Journalists from other news organizations have personally told me it has intimidated sources from speaking to them.”

In response to the revelations about AP spying, President Obama stated, tellingly, “free press, free expression and the open flow of information help hold

me accountable ... and help our democracy function.” As the Downie report makes clear, though, the Obama administration has failed miserably to abide by even this—grossly mutilated—conception of democratic rights.

Building on the achievements of past administrations, Obama has taken massive strides in freezing and closing down the flow of information. During his 2008 presidential campaign, Obama denounced the “excessive secrecy” of the Bush administration. Since taking office, however, Obama has prosecuted more whistleblowers using the 1917 Espionage Act than all previous administrations combined.

As class tensions intensify to the breaking point in the US, the public’s access to truthful information becomes ever more threatening to the capitalist elite, and systematic deception, state propaganda, and suppression of free speech become necessary instruments of rule.

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