

Environmental Impacts: Like Canada's Harper Government, the Obama Administration is Muzzling Its Scientists

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In recent years, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper has [come under fire](#) for [disallowing scientists working for the Canadian government to speak directly to the press](#).

[An article published in August by The New Republic](#) said "Harper's antagonism toward climate-change experts in his government may sound familiar to Americans," pointing to similar deeds done by the George W. Bush Administration. [That article also said](#) that "Bush's replacement," President Barack Obama, "has reversed course" in this area.

Society for Professional Journalists, the largest trade association for professional journalists in the U.S., disagrees with this conclusion.

In a [December 1 letter written to Gina McCarthy](#), administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the society chided the Obama administration for its methods of responding to journalists' queries to speak to EPA-associated scientists.

"We write to urge you again to clarify that members of the EPA Science Advisory Board (SAB) and the twenty other EPA science advisory committees have the right and are encouraged to speak to the public and the press about any scientific issues, including those before these committees, in a personal capacity without prior authorization from the agency," [said the letter](#).

"We urge you...to ensure that EPA advisory committee members are encouraged share their expertise and opinions with those who would benefit from it."

Press NGOs: Muzzling Policy Impacts

Harper maintains similar procedures, with [scientists unable to speak directly to the press without prior authorization](#) from public relations higher-ups.

Unlike the Harper rules, [EPA Science Advisory Board members](#) do not work directly for the U.S. government. Instead, they serve as advisors for U.S. environmental policy, but almost all members work full-time at U.S. universities, corporations or environmental groups.

Critics say muzzling of these scientists matters because they make policy decisions with real-world impacts on society.

“Federal advisory committees are generally composed of experts outside the federal government who provide advice to policymakers on a broad range of issues,” the Society for Professional Journalists, Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, Society of Environmental Journalists and others [wrote in an earlier August letter](#).

“Very often, their advice carries great weight and is reflected in final rules, especially when statutes require that regulations be developed based solely on the best available science.”

Muzzling Fits into Broader Trends

Due to National Security Administration (NSA) surveillance of electronic communications and the U.S. [Department of Justice subpoenaing phone records of the Associated Press'](#) newsroom, the Committee to Protect Journalists — which generally only covers the media of other countries — wrote an [October 2013 report about Obama's press treatment](#).

The committee's report concludes that the AP subpoena and NSA electronic surveillance has gone a step further than the EPA's procedure to route journalists to PR spokespeople for comment. That is, they also want to control and know who journalists are talking to off-the-record or confidentially, which the report concludes has had a [chilling effect for both sources and reporters](#).

“I worry now about calling somebody because the contact can be found out through a check of phone records or e-mails,” [R. Jeffrey Smith](#), a reporter for the Center for Public Integrity, said in a [statement to the Committee to Protect Journalists](#). “It leaves a digital trail that makes it easier for the government to monitor those contacts.”

Due to the report's findings and other related issues, investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill has said on multiple occasions that the [Obama Administration has launched a “war on journalism.”](#)

Stop Spin, Let Sunshine In

A July letter written by many free press and open government organizations called on the Obama Administration “to stop the spin and let the sunshine in.”

“You recently expressed concern that frustration in the country is breeding cynicism about democratic government,” [they wrote](#). “You need look no further than your own administration for a major source of that frustration – politically driven suppression of news and information about federal agencies. We call on you to take a stand to stop the spin and let the sunshine in.”

These groups also demanded the Obama administration reverse course and issue a new, press-friendly policy.

“We ask that you issue a clear directive telling federal employees they're not only free to answer questions from reporters and the public, but actually encouraged to do so,” [they continued](#). “We believe that is one of the most important things you can do for the nation now, before the policies become even more entrenched.”

To date, there is little indication a policy shift from Obama is in order in this sphere, though.



So for now, not only do Canada and the U.S. have a shared bond in that [record amounts of Alberta's tar sands now flow into the U.S.](#), but also that the muzzling of scientists, and by extension the press at-large, is a threat to democracy in both countries.

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