

Journalists say White House secrecy has chilling effect

By Michael Tarm, AP

CHICAGO – Editors and reporters meeting in Chicago raised concerns Wednesday about what they described as a lack of access and transparency undermining journalists' work, several blaming the current White House for setting standards for secrecy that are spreading nationwide.

Criticism of President Obama's administration on the issue of openness in government came on the last day of a three-day joint convention of the American Society of News Editors, the Associated Press Media Editors and the Associated Press Photo Managers.

"The White House push to limit access and reduce transparency has essentially served as the secrecy road map for all kinds of organizations – from local and state governments to universities and even sporting events," Brian Carovillano, AP managing editor for U.S. news, said during a panel discussion.

James Risen, a *New York Times* reporter who is facing potential jail time as he battles government efforts to force him to testify at the trial of a former CIA officer accused of leaking classified information, also spoke at the conference. Risen said intense pressure on reporters and their sources is having a chilling effect on newsgathering.

He spoke of scaring one source just by going to his home and knocking on the front door.

"He opened the door and he turned white," Risen said. "He marches me back through the kitchen (to a back exit) and said, 'Go out that way.'"

Risen added that the government appeared to be taking advantage of how the media industry is off balance amid the growing influence of online news sources and financial hardships. He asked if the government would have taken such a hard line when traditional media were on firmer footing decades ago.

"I kind of think the answer is no," he said. Media shouldn't shrink before the challenge, Risen said, adding, "The only response ... is to do even more aggressive investigative reporting."

The AP's Washington chief of bureau, Sally Buzbee, said the Obama administration's efforts to control information extend even to agencies not directly involved in intelligence gathering. Some sources, she said, have reportedly been warned they could be fired for even talking to a reporter.

"Day-to-day intimidation of sources is also extremely chilling," she said.

Buzbee said she's frequently asked if the Obama administration, when it comes to transparency, is worse than the administration of President George W. Bush.

"Bush was not fantastic," she said. She added, "The (Obama) administration is significantly worse than previous administrations."

White House spokesman Eric Schultz said Obama is committed to transparency.

"Over the past six years, federal agencies have gone to great efforts to make government more transparent and more accessible than ever, to provide people with information that they can use in their daily lives, and to solicit public participation in government decision-making and thus tap the expertise that resides outside of government," Schultz said in a emailed statement.

Some speakers Wednesday also broached questions of reporters' safety after recent beheadings of journalists by Islamic militants.

John Daniszewski, an AP senior managing editor of international news, said organizations that threaten reporters today have more chaotic chains of command. As a result, he said, militants might act on orders of an immediate commander rather than a government authority.

"While danger is nothing new ... there has been a shift," he said.

Santiago Lyon, AP's director of photography, added freelancers are also more prevalent in conflict zones. He said among the questions media groups must ask about freelancers they are considering relying on is, "Are they bona fide journalists ... rather than just thrill seekers?"