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The Craig Newmark Center for
ETHICS and
LEADERSHIP

SHUT OUT

Strategies for good journalism
when sources dismiss the press

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The state of play:

The Democratic-controlled New York State Assembly lifts all its COVID protocols — except the one that lets journalists within an arm's reach of lawmakers.

The sheriff in Daytona Beach, Florida, refuses to alert the local paper to news conferences or comment about crimes after a social media dispute over coverage.

A reporter for the nonprofit Colorado Sun is removed from an important Republican Party meeting after being told the party chair thought her reporting was unfair.

Relationships between public officials and journalists have always been fraught. There has long been a tension over how and when to make public the, well, public's business.

But that tension has deteriorated to unabashed hostility. The result: Journalists are denied access needed to hold the powerful to account, and the public is denied information about how its money is spent or about the actions of those elected to serve.

At the Poynter Institute, we have been collecting examples, talking with professionals and contemplating strategies to stem this erosion of access that undermines the value of independent reporting that helps citizens participate robustly in their civic life.

Journalists tell us they are increasingly shut out from attending important events, or thwarted in trying to report on matters of central interest to their local news audiences. When journalists seek access to sources, especially those in positions of power, they are too often met with tactics aimed at denying, delaying and distracting them from doing their jobs — and frequently denounced or harassed for trying.

It happens in all realms of coverage, from national and state politicians to local public officials, to private businesses to athletes and celebrities. Often it includes the illegal denial of access to public places and public records.

Certainly, journalistic work can have its detractors, and powerful people have a rich history of balking at efforts to shine a light on their actions. But political polarization, repeated vitriol from those who would demonize the media, and a breakdown of relationships between journalists and the people they cover have made the problem more severe.

When journalists are shut out, the public is shut out. And though those in power declare they prefer to reach consumers directly through other means, such as social channels, they are often undermining a core component of the public's power to frame its own view: independent reporting.

After collecting a range of case studies, the **Craig Newmark Center for Ethics and Leadership at the Poynter Institute** convened a one-day symposium of journalists and thought leaders at the offices of the Knight Foundation in Miami, Florida in late 2023. The goal was

to identify techniques related to journalistic craft to improve trust, transparency and truth-seeking. The group represented a breadth of expertise across coverage areas and a diversity of experience, including journalists and experts in politics, ethics and media law.

We posed this central question:

How must journalists adapt their work to serve their audiences with complete, fair and accurate reporting when key sources and newsmakers have opted out?

This report expounds on this central answer:

Even amid challenging economic pressures, news organizations must make a fresh commitment to beat reporting and source relationships. Though we tout these as fundamentals of journalism, we can elevate our execution of them. Journalists must reduce reliance on email interviews, staged events, official proclamations and contact with usual suspects.

“Not all, but many who do the public’s business have taken a misguided and unfortunate stance that they are under no obligation to make themselves or their work available for independent journalistic review, even though it is an essential component of our civic life,” said Neil Brown, Poynter president.



About a dozen people -- journalists, and experts in politics, law and ethics -- came together for a symposium to discuss how to adapt to serve audiences as more sources are unwilling to engage with reporters.

What else can help? In summary, some key strategies offered by our journalist experts:

- Let go of the fear that we don't want to “become the story,” and instead tell your audiences how you tried to obtain the information. Be willing to offer audiences more detail about when sources would not cooperate. Remember: the lack of cooperation is essentially with the public.
- Rather than focus on who's not talking, find out where sources are talking and spend energy on time and relationships there. The hard part: an important recommitment to reporters getting out of the office.
- Partner rather than compete with other journalists in order to cover more ground. There is power in numbers and sharing interviews and other reporting is cost-effective.
- Pool resources with others to invoke legal rights to public documents, and be willing to go to court to fight for access. And explain to your audience why the legal efforts are on the community's behalf.

“Both sides have this in common: They serve a public audience. So journalists need to find new sources and not be thwarted in telling people what they have a right to know. Putting value on source development and working to establish relationships with subjects and with audiences is a pivot away, at least a little, from the high-volume, low-value touches that have defined reporting in recent years. We understand the economic and audience demands of around-the-clock news posting. But to promote issues of trust and grow the value and service of independent journalism, we must recommit to these relationships. It is essential to complete and accurate reporting.”

CASE STUDIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. When sources won't engage with journalists

More than a decade ago, Florida's then-Gov. Rick Scott began taking his news conferences [on the road](#), often in smaller towns, away from the informed questions of Florida's plugged-in press corps in Tallahassee. Mary Ellen Klas, a politics and policy columnist for Bloomberg Opinion and a longtime Florida statehouse reporter, said this allowed Scott to avoid deeper scrutiny by “entertaining questions from local television reporters who often had more of a superficial understanding of the issues and rarely challenged the governor.”

Ron DeSantis, Florida's governor since 2019 and a recent presidential candidate, took this practice to a new level, Klas said. One memorable example occurred in 2021, when he announced he wanted to ban

local governments from adopting COVID-19 health protocols.

“Rather than conducting the news conference in Tallahassee, where he would face questions from capitol reporters who had followed the issue, he flew on the state plane 105 miles to Panama City Beach where his staff assembled a cheering crowd of supporters,” Klas said. “... He got no questions. This pattern of avoiding questions, ... and conducting the event as if it were a campaign rally, has continued to this day.”

The result of these and similar practices is to replace journalistic scrutiny with stagecraft.

Patterns of media evasion and selective engagement have become the norm for many newsmakers. They may work with media that are friendly to or aligned with the

source's views, resulting in little to no accountability questions or pushback. Many sources who once engaged with reporters, even if grudgingly, have become masters of media avoidance.

When DeSantis went to Pittsburgh to campaign for Doug Mastriano, a Republican running for Pennsylvania governor in 2022, the event's sponsor, an advocacy group called Turning Point Action, listed rules journalists had to agree to before entering the event.

“They wanted us to agree that all audio, video, anything we recorded for broadcast, they would have access to and would get to look at it,” said Cindi Lash, vice president of news for WESA public media, Pittsburgh's NPR news station. “And if they wanted to use it for campaigns or commercials or whatever, they would

do so.”

Lash’s team covered the event without entering the hotel. They interviewed people outside the event, which was eventually livestreamed so they could view what was said.

Because of several factors, including the 24/7 cable news cycle and social media, reluctant public figures can avoid journalists but still reach a receptive audience.

Sergio Bustos, vice president of news for WLRN South Florida Public Media, said newsmakers know their audience “and tend to gravitate toward a friendly journalist or host and avoid those that they deem ‘hostile’ or who would challenge them.”

He added, ominously: “I don’t think the public cares. They, I believe, compound the problem because they are tuning in or clicking on TV or digital news outlets that lean heavily toward their political point of view. MSNBC (liberal). Fox News

“Many have written off the media as left-wing and biased. In many ways, they shut off media and instead only grant interviews to outlets that support their political views.”

Hollis R. Towns
vice president of content and editor-in-chief of the
Alabama Media Group

(conservative).”

Hollis R. Towns, a longtime newspaper news executive who is now vice president of content and editor-in-chief of the Alabama Media Group, has a similar view regarding cable news. Towns said newsmakers often believe the media is unfair and out to get them. “Many have written off the media as left-wing and biased,” he said. “In many ways, they shut off media and instead only grant interviews to

outlets that support their political views.”

April Schiff, a political consultant and president of Strategic Solutions of Florida, as well as an elected Republican Party committeewoman in Tampa, agreed that some newsmakers lack trust in the media. Because they have the tools and methods to engage with the audience, Schiff said they have become comfortable working without traditional media.

“Officials can now launch their own messages on multiple platforms to reach constituents and the public within minutes and achieve a wider, more controlled message delivery,” she said.

She added that pay-to-play platforms allow for direct publication of a specific communication with little chance of editing or altering the original message.

What is a reporter to do in this evolving new world of limited access? While sources may attempt to seize control of their narrative, journalists still have plenty of options at their disposal to keep their audiences informed and sources accountable.

The strongest points of consensus at Poynter’s symposium were recommendations that centered on a recommitment to good beat reporting: getting out of the office and building personal relationships with sources, ensuring the source

pool includes ground-up, community sources, and developing subject-matter expertise to present information even if a source isn't giving it to you.

The panel acknowledged that the pandemic, devastated newsroom budgets and the changing information landscape all make this a real challenge, but stressed how important it is for an informed audience.

Recommendation: **Build new source relationships**

Expanding your network of sources beyond the "official" and into the community offers more ways to get at the story. It also increases the expertise of the reporter on their beat, which in turn establishes credibility and trust with other sources.

Justin Garcia, state and local accountability reporter for the

“For me, it’s been about touching base with where the community is, making sure the community trusts you enough to give you that important information.”

Justin Garcia, state and local accountability reporter for the Tampa Bay Times

Tampa Bay Times, said it takes time and effort to build trust with community sources, but it’s worth it.

In addition to school board members and union representatives, talk to students, parents, custodians and school volunteers. In addition to police officers, talk with their neighbors or friends.

“These people in the community — you don’t realize it — are well sourced. They have friends and family members in police departments and sheriff’s departments,” he said. “They’re

getting to know you, they’re going to trust you. They’re talking to the people in those departments and they’re able to feed me information” that can help narrow a public records request.

“It doesn’t mean you just completely burn your sources that are higher up. That doesn’t mean that you neglect them. You still do still foster those.”

He added: “For me, it’s been about touching base with where the community is, making sure the community trusts you enough to give you that important information.”

As local news staffs have shrunk, ties to the community have weakened. Repairing these relationships requires that reporters invest time in rebuilding these ties. Poynter senior vice president Kelly McBride, chair of the Newmark Center for Ethics and Leadership, teaches newsrooms how to reframe traditional crime coverage. Over six months, a small newsroom team meets with Poynter instructors and other newsrooms to rethink coverage standards, shifting from simply documenting specific episodes of crime to explaining trends.

When news organizations make this change successfully, they naturally increase the amount of insight and information gained from community sources, and they minimize their reliance on information handed out by law enforcement. The result is a more accurate picture of public safety concerns and solutions.

“Every newsroom declares it wants

to be the ‘trusted source’ of news,” McBride says. “Rooting coverage of public safety in the concerns and experiences of the community makes the coverage more accurate and complete, and therefore more trustworthy.”

The attendees at Poynter’s symposium also noted the importance of routine beat coverage: stories that aren’t landscape-shifting investigations, but those that feature the community or address issues those in the community — potential sources — feel are important.

For Garcia, editor buy-in is key. “Sometimes they’re like, well, that’s not sexy enough. That’s not gonna get enough clicks. That’s kind of insider. But people really pay attention and it builds that trust.”

News leaders should incentivize giving their reporters the ability to get out into the community to talk to people. Rebuilding — or building for the first time — in-person connections with sources can open



Sergio Bustos, vice president of news for WLRN in South Florida, tells journalists that when sources aren’t talking to them, they need to find out who the sources are talking to — whether it be partisan media, national news shows or social media — to track their work and points of view.

side doors to stories.

Mike Wilson, deputy editor of The Great Read feature of The New York Times and the former editor of The Dallas Morning News, said upon reflection he would have invested less in social media and breaking news desks in Dallas that essentially work inside an office and invested more in reporters who went places and talked to people.

“I know as a journalist that you get stories by showing up,” he said.

Recommendation:

Look for where they *are* talking

Bustos of WLRN tells his editors and reporters: “They may not be talking to us but they are talking to somebody. This is especially true with conservative politicians, mainly backers of President Trump. We do find them on X, Facebook, or Rumble or YouTube. Newsmax is especially good for getting

conservative politicians.”

His other strategy is to find transcripts. Most of the major cable networks, CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC, publish transcripts from their shows.

“Another great source is [ProPublica’s Recent Congressional Statements database](#). It contains the latest press releases, statements of House and Senate members. It’s not comprehensive, but it’s very timely.”

Recommendation: **Speak up.** **Who else will?**

Our panelists also said it’s crucial for journalists to be transparent when a source shuts down or limits access in the hope of limiting accountability.

A simple “could not be reached for comment” is not enough. Journalists should make an effort to explain to the audience not only that the source is unwilling to participate, but also

“Journalists are historically hesitant to make themselves the story and/or worried that admitting the government is stifling their ability to report the news is a confession of weakness. That needs to stop.”

Seth Stern, director of advocacy at Freedom of the Press Foundation.

the context and ramifications of that decision. That shows the reporter is holding the newsmaker accountable and explaining that by withholding information from the journalist, they are also shutting out the public.

“Journalists are historically hesitant to make themselves the story and/or worried that admitting the government is stifling their ability to report the news is a confession of weakness,” said Seth Stern, director of advocacy at Freedom of the Press

Foundation. “That needs to stop.”

He said journalists should [write about it](#). “Make clear in the story that you would’ve liked to attend the event yourself or speak to the official or their staff but you weren’t allowed to do so. If they believe the coverage is biased, they have themselves to blame, and perhaps they’ll reconsider for next time.”

In the case of the Pittsburgh campaign event with DeSantis and Mastriano, WESA released a

pre-event story on the campaign’s “ground rules” with the [headline](#), “Rules for covering DeSantis visit to Pittsburgh pose ethical quandary, experts say.” The day of the event, another story explained why WESA chose not to comply with the campaign’s rules:

“Abiding by those conditions could pose a challenge to journalistic ethics. For example, [NPR’s Ethics Handbook](#), which guides WESA journalists in their work, stipulates that reporters must maintain their independence. Among its principles is ‘Don’t allow sources to dictate our coverage.’ We don’t allow sources to dictate how a topic will be covered, or which other voices or ideas will be included in the stories we do.”

II. Open records: A guide to help the owner — the public — have access

On March 16, 2020, the first Chicagoan died from COVID-19.

Using information from the daily Cook County medical examiner's report, newsrooms identified the victim, a 61-year-old retired nurse. [WBEZ published a story](#) about her life and the impact of her death.

"Days later, Cook County stopped providing the report," said Tracy Brown, chief content officer at Chicago Public Media, which includes WBEZ and the Chicago Sun-Times.

By April 1, at least 141 people in the state had died, and at least 7,000 people had been infected. After much back and forth with the county seeking the records, Brown told them WBEZ planned to sue.

"After weeks of blocking the report,

the county relented and released the data quietly on (a) Friday evening," Brown said. "We worked through the night and next day to analyze the data and produced what became the first story in the country about who was dying. We showed that [70% of COVID-19 deaths in Chicago were Black](#) people. We thought it and suspected it, but we didn't have proof until they gave the data to us.

"Shortly after our story, the mayor's office announced health initiatives targeting Black populations and low-income populations," Brown said.

Some sources deny or delay access to records as required by law because they are trying to control the narrative. Another reason, according to Stern from the Freedom of the Press Foundation, is that FOIA offices are understaffed and

undertrained.

In 2022, the federal government received more than 928,000 FOIA requests — a record high and 90,000 more than in 2021. The number of backlogged requests also soared over the previous year, to nearly 207,000, according to the most recent [Office of Information Policy](#) report from the Justice Department.

The delays are happening at the local level, too. In Louisville, Kentucky, for example, open records requests more than doubled in six months, from 955 unfilled requests in May 2023 to more than 2,000 in December 2023. [The mayor blamed staff shortages.](#)

Beyond never-ending backlogs, Stern said he observes regular abuses of open records laws, including government agencies' baseless assertions of exemptions and

exorbitant charges for compliance.

"We're seeing more and more where people get a response to a records request that says something like, 'The research time it's going to take us to comply with that request, we're going to have to charge you \$40,000,'" said Stern.

Recommendation: **Tell your audience details about records denials**

Stern's No. 1 recommendation for dealing with access issues, including public records denials, is to write about it.

This could be explicit, like the "[What Are They Hiding?](#)" series from the Las Vegas Review-Journal, the "[Revealing Records](#)" column from

The Washington Post’s first FOIA director, or even [this follow-up story](#) from the team in Louisville affected by record denials.

Be specific and add context, he said: **Specify** how many times a request for information was made, how much money the news organization had to pay, and whether there is a precedent for this kind of request.

He also suggested embedding this material within stories as much as possible.

“Stories about the newsgathering process are oftentimes separated from the actual news report. Oftentimes, it’s an editorial about the obstacles that journalists are facing in getting the news,” said Stern. “And some people do read those editorials or those separate reports and do react to them. But the way news is consumed and spread around these days, you can’t just assume that somebody who read the news report is also reading the editorial.”



Better connecting the how-we-got-the-story column to the actual work it references has implications for both digital and print design. And reporters should include more of these details in the story itself.

Recommendation: Consider legal action

News organizations have sued to gain access to public records for years — and it still works.

“We get denied records all the time,” said Brown, the leader of Chicago Public Media. “We do have a lawyer

The Las Vegas Review-Journal created the “What Are They Hiding?” to educate readers about open records laws and when officials try to block coverage – an example of how Seth Stern said journalists should communicate with their audience.

who specializes in FOIAs. He mostly only takes cases that he believes he can win, which means he doesn’t have to charge us. If we get stuck, we’ll do that.”

Letting sources know you’re considering legal action might be enough to wriggle the records free.

Stern agreed calling a lawyer for a consultation, at minimum, is beneficial to weigh options. Sometimes, setting a bad legal precedent for future journalists is a concern with a particular case. Even so, beginning the process could persuade sources to reconsider, and

cases can be dropped before getting to a point where precedent can be altered.

He also recommended that reporters get familiar with resources like the [Reporter’s Committee for Freedom of the Press’ legal hotline](#), the Society of Professional Journalists’ [legal defense fund](#), and similar resources that may be available through local organizations.

Actually suing for records can pay off, literally, and put public pressure on government agencies to rethink denials and delays, according to a [WBUR report](#) from September 2023 about local governments in Massachusetts. For example, the city of Worcester paid the Worcester Telegram & Gazette \$180,000 for illegally withholding records.

Forming consortiums with other media outlets to split the costs of suing for records is another tried and true tactic that can help get around these challenges.

III. Barred and blocked: When physical barriers get in the way

Before the pandemic, reporters were allowed onto the floor of the New York State Assembly. They could approach lawmakers during downtime and ask questions about lengthy proposals and sticking points. They could go behind the speaker podium to witness informal gaggles or access additional meeting rooms.

Pandemic lockdowns relegated journalists to a few seats in the back of the chamber.

Now four years later — despite formal requests from the New York State Legislative Correspondents Association and a [rules change request](#) from state Republicans to reinstate press access — the Democratic supermajority still denies reporters physical access in the lower house. Mask requirements, capacity restrictions and other limitations related to health and

“I’ve got somebody out there huddled on the sidewalk with an umbrella. She’s trying to catch people when they come out. But then they come out three other doors.”

Cindi Lash, vice president of news for WESA public media, Pittsburgh’s NPR news station

safety have long been lifted.

Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie’s [comms team has also denied](#) any change occurred at all, arguing that reporters had never been allowed on the floor.

“Many of my fellow statehouse reporters used the term ‘gaslighting’ to describe this situation,” said Rebecca Lewis, senior state politics reporter at City & State New York. “We tried time and again to get our

access restored. ... We even had longtime journalists who covered the institution provide photos of them talking to lawmakers on the floor.”

According to the [Press Freedom Tracker](#), state governments in Iowa, Kansas, Utah and Texas also delayed lifting pandemic-era restrictions on reporter access until 2022 and 2023.

Meanwhile, [Pittsburgh Public Schools and other entities](#) in Allegheny County still held their

public meetings exclusively online until December 2023 — more than two years after the law allowing virtual meetings of public agencies expired. Sometimes the school board itself would meet in person, but the doors were still closed to the public, offering no options for impromptu questions or comments.

“I’ve got somebody out there huddled on the sidewalk with an umbrella. She’s trying to catch people when they come out. But then they come out three other doors,” said Lash at Pittsburgh Community Broadcasting. “This hampers coverage by news organizations like ours because journalists have far fewer options to pose questions about the board’s handling of crucial issues, such as a recent report on [discrepancies in discipline](#) of white students and students of color.”

While government reporters might

not be used to being blocked from press conferences and public meetings, journalists in other areas, like sports and entertainment, have long dealt with tightly controlled physical access to their sources and strict rules of engagement.

In September 2023, the University of Southern California [suspended](#) Orange County Register beat reporter Luca Evans from USC football facilities and press conferences, arguing he violated a policy of reporting remarks made outside official team media availability. USC and head coach Lincoln Riley upheld the suspension after a letter from the media group's top editors, even though they could not point to the specific policy that was broken or back up any claims of inaccurate reporting.

"It is extremely difficult to gain access to many newsmakers, particularly the ones in sports that I need to speak with to do my job," said Don Van Natta Jr., ESPN

investigative reporter. "Nearly all the sources I try to reach are tightly controlled by handlers, like agents and PR execs."

The Tampa Bay Times' Garcia says his approach to grassroots sourcing can also be beneficial for journalists who are denied access to physical spaces, because a community member might be able to enter, take notes, record audio or even ask questions on a journalist's behalf.

Van Natta said that for him, a "combination of persistence and stubbornness" typically also yields success.

Recommendation: **Collaborate rather than compete**

Another strategy is to put competitive instincts aside.

Klas, the former Florida capitol reporter, and Lewis, the New York statehouse reporter, discussed how they started asking competitors

who are present at an event or press conference for help — or to at least share a recording or transcript from a tool like Otter.

"I'll say, 'If you get a question in, here are some things we're interested in.' I'll put my questions on Twitter, and I'll say, 'Here's what you should be asking.' It's worked!" Klas said. "I think it would be a really good thing if there was more cooperation, collaboration, like if there was an email chain or a WhatsApp chain of reporters that were covering the same thing."

In the way that the White House press corps creates pool reports to "[balance reporting needs with logistical realities](#)," local journalists could collaborate with each other to share updates on key newsmakers' activities.

If someone in the New York legislative correspondents association "is able to make a particular event and no one else is, they'll send an untelevised gaggle,"

Lewis said. "Even if the event is livestreamed, the Q&A afterwards often has not been. So if you're not there, then you need to know someone who's there."

Cooperation and solidarity could be a strategy to help The Daytona Beach News-Journal, which has been in a standoff with Volusia County Sheriff Mike Chitwood since 2023, after its editor wrote a column criticizing him for trashing a reporter on social media. The [sheriff has since stopped alerting the paper](#) to important press conferences.

[In an interview with the paper](#), [Barbara Petersen](#), a longtime open government and press freedom advocate in Florida who now heads the Florida Center for Government Accountability, said it's the public Chitwood is punishing with his stance, not the paper, and that the press corps should "just boycott him: If they can't come, then we won't either."

IV. Pandemic and polarization: Chilling effects on good journalism

The COVID-19 pandemic halted the practice of building relationships face to face. And the deepening political polarization in which newsmakers have increasingly vilified journalists with whom they disagree has also served as a deterrent for journalists to venture to places that may now seem unsafe.

Attendees at Poynter's ethics symposium discussed how the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered the practice of journalism, from the proliferation of remote and hybrid workplaces to the fracturing of in-person relationships.

"Legislators and other elected officials got used to the fact that we weren't in their face anymore, or we weren't even showing up," Klas said. "And so there's been a behavioral shift that signals they don't really want reporters — especially those with hard questions — to come."

"The pandemic allowed a lot of us to do our jobs at home, and it can be very comfortable. You can report from your computer as much as you want. But you need to be in the weeds of things to get the real story."

Mesfin Fekadu, senior music editor at The Hollywood Reporter and former entertainment reporter at the AP

Mesfin Fekadu, senior music editor at The Hollywood Reporter and former entertainment reporter at The Associated Press, saw the behavioral shift among journalists, too: "The pandemic allowed a lot of us to do our jobs at home, and it can be very comfortable. You can report from your computer as much as

you want. But you need to be in the weeds of things to get the real story."

Symposium attendees discussed how early career journalists, particularly those who started during the pandemic and an especially unstable era of layoffs, need to be coached on how to have

less transactional interactions, including showing up to happy hours or lunches.

"It's not easy to do, but it can be done," said Schiff, the longtime political consultant. "Part of this is because our entire society is changing. The internet, the 24-hour news stations, the pandemic. All of those things are colliding to make us a different society than we used to be."

Consequences of the pandemic were often unavoidable, but some more intentional actions in which newsmakers treat journalists as part of a political strategy have created a chilling effect on newsgathering.

In January 2023, Arizona Capitol Times reporter Camryn Sanchez started looking into whether Arizona state Sen. Wendy Rogers actually lived in the legislative district she represents. Conflicting records

raised questions.

Sanchez, a credentialed journalist, started knocking on doors and approached Rogers at the capitol to ask about the conflicting information. Rogers [filed a restraining order against Sanchez](#) in April 2023, claiming this shoe-leather reporting amounted to harassment. In the initial hearing, Rogers asked the judge to ban Sanchez from the capitol entirely. Afterward, Rogers said she didn't "trust that this person wouldn't lash out and try to physically harm me in some fashion."

The initial judge didn't prevent Sanchez from entering the capitol, but did uphold the injunction to stop her from talking to the senator and visiting her homes. The news organization appealed, and another judge dismissed the case, writing that Sanchez had a legitimate purpose for her behavior.

He referenced other legitimate door knockers: trick-or-treaters and

politicians seeking reelection, like Rogers herself.

Efforts to block reporters' work can go further than restraining orders.

Former President Barack Obama prosecuted more whistleblowers under the Espionage Act than all prior administrations combined. And, in 2013, the Obama administration obtained the records of 20 Associated Press office phone lines and reporters' home and cell phones, seizing them without notice, as part of an investigation into the disclosure of information about a foiled al-Qaida terrorist plot, [according to the AP](#), even though it was not the target of the investigation.

It's a truism that most journalists don't do well at educating their audience or sources about how they work. A lack of understanding and trust alone can work against journalists getting access, but it can also lead to a more complex dynamic: sources in the public eye

attacking the newsgathering process to avoid accountability.

Stern said journalists are going to see more hostility, especially if they stop being persistent, as it would make door-knocking seem more out of place. "Stop doing these things like knocking on doors, and politicians stop expecting it. You're going to have more people who actually think it is creepy when journalists knock on your door and not realizing that that's what journalism is, that's what you're supposed to do."

Klas, who was formerly the capitol bureau chief at the Miami Herald, said she has seen the stoking of distrust of journalists create a chilling effect when she covered the DeSantis administration. "There are people in his administration who had good relationships and have long had good relationships, and I've used them to work to get information. But here's what happens: They can't talk on the record. Because if they do, their governor is going to notice they

were quoted, and that's not cool."

Schiff, the Republican political consultant, agrees and said hostility is directed not only at the journalist, but also at other elected officials when they fall out of line. "The meanness, the ugliness, the personal attacks, has gotten really out of control."

Klas sees this as a toxic cycle. "I believe at least the people that have denied access to me and to my organization have done it because they don't want the full story. They can then point to our stories as biased. And then their base will say, Yeah, you're right. And that just fuels this whole thing."

Recommendation: **Invest time (yikes!) in relationship building**

Journalists should try to get in front of sources as quickly as possible. Being present is also an opportunity to educate them on their jobs and

their intentions.

“I always made a practice of meeting with freshmen legislators,” Klas said. “And many of them used to have relationships with their local reporters, because they were doing the voter guide.”

With the decline of local newspapers and corresponding rise in news deserts, there are fewer reporters out in the field to connect with and build sources.

“Now, nobody has any idea” how reporters work, Klas said. “And I think what they think reporters are, are the ones they see on cable television. They think that’s what everybody does. They think that everybody has a point of view or is partisan.”

Conclusion

Developing good sources is the central work of good journalism. It was never easy, and now it’s even harder. Economic pressures have

“Good journalism that makes change in a community has value. We must remember the power of our work to improve people’s lives. That will ultimately be the thing that gets our audience to care, and will keep us relevant to citizens and to sources. We have to find ways, as we’ve laid out in this report, to keep pushing to tell complete and fair stories.”

Neil Brown, Poynter president

reduced the number of reporters, and chasing online revenue has put a premium on the frequency and volume of reports rather than the depth and quality of stories. That has meant decidedly less time for face-to-face reporting. That very pullback from more expensive relationship building renders journalists of less value to sources who used to rely on

getting their knowledge, their stories or their viewpoints out to the public. Many don’t know us at all, and a lot of others have decided they don’t need us.

At Poynter, we interact with newsrooms across the U.S. and the world, in addition to those who generously gave their time at our symposium. They tell us these

dynamics are real and growing. Efforts to circumvent the press are increasing, as are denials of public records and partisan media outlets masquerading as mainstream. Journalists lack the authority and, yes, usefulness, we once had, which makes it easier for the cycle to perpetuate and sources to bypass us. But giving up is not an option.

“We must recommit to the core values of beat reporting, recognize the value of talking with people less by Zoom appointment and more face-to-face so that our journalism is richer than short transactions,” said Poynter president Neil Brown. “This will require a commitment of time and improved training on craft that feels out of reach in challenging economic times. But the long-term health of the business — the relevance and service to our audience relies on it.

“Good journalism that makes change in a community has value. We must remember the power of our work

to improve people’s lives. That will ultimately be the thing that gets our audience to care, and will keep us relevant to citizens and to sources,” he said. “We have to find ways, as we’ve laid out in this report, to keep pushing to tell complete and fair stories.”

Join the discussion and share your experiences with or questions about resistant sources with us at sources@poynter.org for potential use in a future poynter.org article. Look for information soon about a LinkedIn Live with our team to discuss effective strategies for informing our audiences. Poynter intends to continue work on this dynamic, present at conferences and offer public and custom training for journalists in the future.



Journalists at Poynter’s ethics symposium in 2023 discuss strategies to develop better source relationships, even amid the challenges of shrinking budgets and staffs.

About the symposium

Thirteen experts attended or otherwise contributed to a symposium at the Knight Foundation offices in Miami, Florida for a daylong discussion with Poynter of the dynamic of sources shutting out the media. All discussion was considered off the record. Participants have approved the use of the quotes and anecdotes cited in this report.

Poynter wishes to thank the Knight Foundation for the use of its facilities and the help of its team, and the journalists and other professionals who shared their time and knowledge to help tackle this growing issue in our industry.

Symposium participants

Tracy Brown, chief content officer at Chicago Public Media
Sergio Bustos, vice president of news for WLRN South Florida Public Media
Mesfin Fekadu, senior music editor, The Hollywood Reporter
Justin Garcia, state and local accountability reporter for the Tampa Bay Times
Alan Halaly, former editor, the Independent Florida Alligator, University of Florida
Mary Ellen Klas, politics and policy columnist for Bloomberg Opinion
Cindi Lash, vice president of news for WESA Public Media
Rebecca Lewis, senior state politics reporter at City & State New York.
April Schiff, president, co-founder, Strategic Solutions of Florida
Seth Stern, director of advocacy at Freedom of the Press Foundation
Hollis R. Towns, vice president of content and editor-in-chief, Alabama Media Group
Don Van Natta, investigative reporter, ESPN
Mike Wilson, deputy editor of The Great Read feature of the New York Times

Poynter participants

Neil Brown, president
Kelly McBride, senior vice president and chair of the Craig Newmark Center for Ethics and Leadership
Fernanda Camarena, faculty
Jennifer Orsi, senior director for publishing and local news initiatives
Mel Grau, director of program management
Lara Shelton, events and experiences manager

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JOURNALISTS' TOOLKIT

Accurate reporting when sources shut down

On your keyboard, press option (on a Mac) or control (on a PC) and right arrow to jump to the next page

Build new source relationships

- Start a relationship with your sources as early as you can – in person. Having a relationship is an opportunity to educate them on your work and intentions.
- Expand your network of sources beyond the “official” and into the community. Get out into the field, gather firsthand accounts from community members and stakeholders. This offers new ways of getting at the story.
- Expand your routine beat coverage. Do stories that feature the community or address issues the people in the community feel are important.



Report for America corps member Jasper Kenzo Sundeen interviews Teresa Romero, president of United Farm Workers in Sunnyside, Washington. (Photo by Santiago Ochoa/Yakima Herald-Republic)

- Cultivate relationships. Take initiative and be proactive when interacting with sources.

Build expertise/beat reporting

- You build authority with each story you produce and each event you attend.
- Have a calendar of key dates (such as legislative votes, annual reports, etc.), a clear map of the arena (the formal bodies, the citizens impacted, the interest groups, the policy analysts, etc.) and a robust list of contacts.
- Focus on discipline, time management, and right-sizing your expectations. Discipline means each week adding a little something to your store of knowledge. Time management gives you space to do that. Getting your expectations straight reduces the frustration that comes when things take longer than you

expect — which they always will.

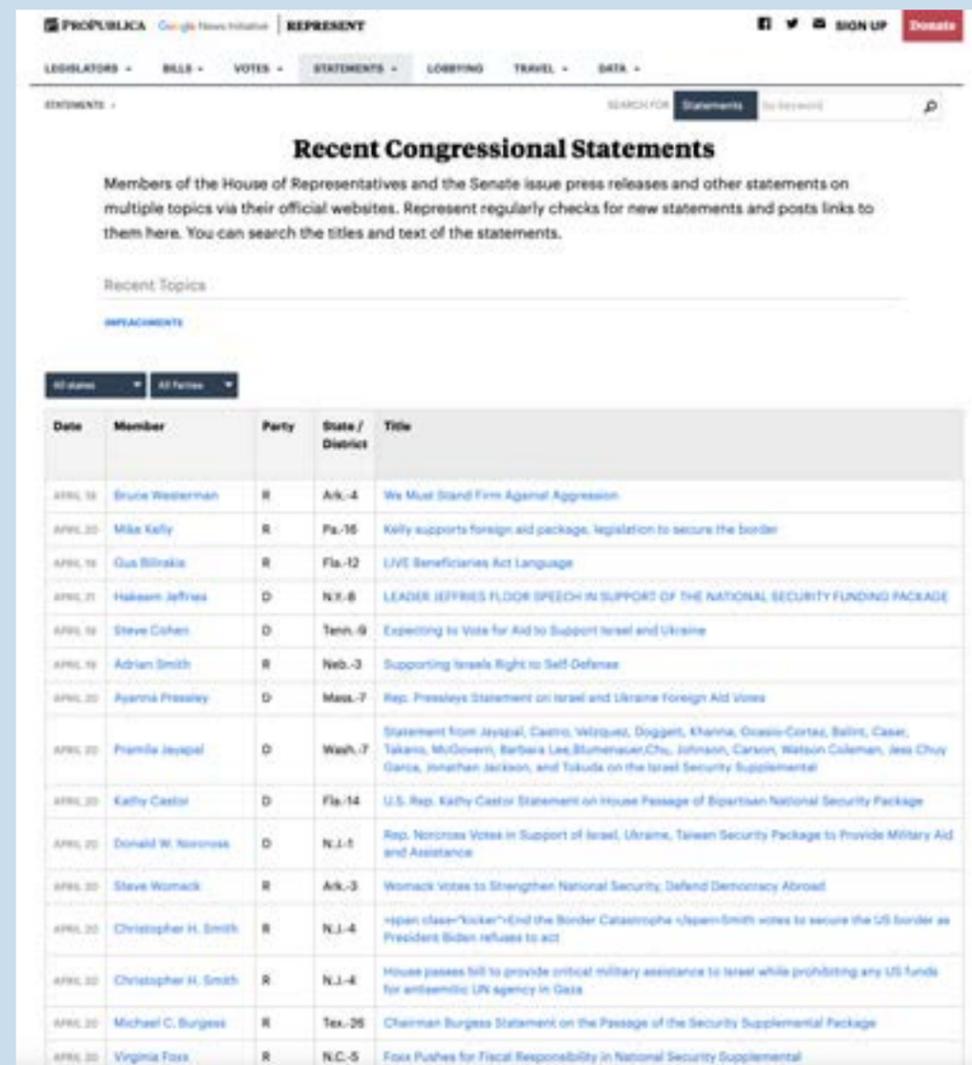
- Make use of tools like Google Alerts to keep tabs on newsmakers who won't communicate with you. You might find out things on the fly.



- Adopt the strategy of small bites of the apple. You don't need to aim for the big takeout. One small story after the next is a great way to learn, build your network and serve the audience.

Look for where they *are* talking

- Find other news outlets or past interviews where the sources you need have spoken before.
- Find transcripts. Most of the major cable networks, CNN, Fox News Sunday, and MSNBC publish transcripts from their shows.
- Use ProPublica's Recent Congressional Statements database. It contains the latest press releases, statements of House and Senate members. It's not comprehensive, but it's very timely.



Date	Member	Party	State / District	Title
APRIL 18	Bruce Westerman	R	Ark.-4	We Must Stand Firm Against Aggression
APRIL 20	Mike Kelly	R	Pa.-16	Kelly supports foreign aid package, legislation to secure the border
APRIL 18	Gus Bilirakis	R	Fla.-12	LVE Beneficiaries Act Language
APRIL 21	Hakeem Jeffries	D	N.Y.-8	LEADER JEFFRIES FLOOR SPEECH IN SUPPORT OF THE NATIONAL SECURITY FUNDING PACKAGE
APRIL 19	Steve Cohen	D	Tenn.-9	Expecting to Vote for Aid to Support Israel and Ukraine
APRIL 19	Adrian Smith	R	Nebr.-3	Supporting Israel's Right to Self-Defense
APRIL 20	Amyra Pressley	D	Mass.-7	Rep. Pressley's Statement on Israel and Ukraine Foreign Aid Votes
APRIL 20	Frankie Espinal	D	WaVa.-7	Statement from Arroyo, Castro, Velázquez, Duggert, Khanna, Gossin-Cortez, Balint, Caser, Takano, McGovern, Barbara Lee, Blumenauer, Cho, Johnson, Carson, Watson Coleman, Jess Choy, Garcia, Jonathan Jackson, and Tokuda on the Israel Security Supplemental
APRIL 20	Kathy Castor	D	Fla.-14	U.S. Rep. Kathy Castor Statement on House Passage of Bipartisan National Security Package
APRIL 20	Donald W. Norcross	D	N.J.-1	Rep. Norcross Votes in Support of Israel, Ukraine, Taiwan Security Package to Provide Military Aid and Assistance
APRIL 20	Steve Womack	R	Ark.-3	Womack Votes to Strengthen National Security, Defend Democracy Abroad
APRIL 20	Christopher H. Smith	R	N.J.-4	Open class="nickel">End the Border Catastrophe Smith votes to secure the US border as President Biden refuses to act
APRIL 20	Christopher H. Smith	R	N.J.-4	House passes bill to provide critical military assistance to Israel while prohibiting any US funds for antisemitic UN agency in Gaza
APRIL 20	Michael C. Burgess	R	Tex.-26	Chairman Burgess Statement on the Passage of the Security Supplemental Package
APRIL 20	Virginia Foxx	R	N.C.-5	Foxx Pushes for Fiscal Responsibility in National Security Supplemental

Platform the problem: publish when sources won't cooperate

- Make a source's refusal as tangible as possible. Include the details of the shutdown in your reporting or editorialize about it.
- Be intentional in educating readers and sources about what you do.
- Alert people through social media and other outlets to issues such as public-records struggles, journalistic hurdles while acquiring information and source's shutdown.
- If your source is a politician, raise the shutdown with the target's political associates, including major political funders. This can sometimes increase the pressure for the person to respond.
- A simple "could not be reached for comment" is not enough. Explain to the audience not only that the source is unwilling to participate, but also the context and ramifications of that decision.
- Consider keeping details about problems with sources or records within the body of a story, rather than in separate pieces that the audience of the original story might miss.

Tell your audience details about records denials

- When you report on records denials, be specific and add context. Specify how many times a request for information was made, or how much money your news organization had to pay.
- Remind your audience about their legal right to know. Denying access to journalists denies access to the public.
- Consider legal action. Letting sources know you're considering suing might be enough to wriggle the records free.
- Call a lawyer for a consultation, at minimum.



- Familiarize yourself with resources like the Reporter's Committee for Freedom of the Press' legal hotline, the Society of Professional Journalist's legal defense fund, and similar resources that may be available through local organizations.
- Form consortiums with other media outlets to split the costs of suing for records.

Collaborate rather than compete

- Strength in numbers. Collaborate with other news organizations in expertise, perspectives, physical access, and legal-defense support. For example, a reporter from another news organization might be able to ask a question at a press conference you can't get to or are barred from.
- Consider creating a pool report with other outlets at the local level or on specific beats.
- Collaboration increases visibility and enhances the public's awareness.

- Collaboration can create pressure on sources and raise the stakes for them. And when one news organization is blocked or silenced, others can show solidarity and help find a way through.



Photo by Tampa Bay Times

It's OK to say NO

- If a source has granted access but with restrictions or conditions, the journalist should weigh that against their journalistic purpose and mission.

- If the sources' requests are unethical or would compromise the integrity of the reporting process, journalists should reject the access and note that in their reporting.

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