

# Freedom to Speak?

## A Report Card on Federal Agency Media Policies

### National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)

POLICY

B

PRACTICE

Satisfactory

In 2006, NASA Administrator Michael Griffin revised the agency's media policies and re-emphasized its "commitment to open scientific and technical inquiry and dialogue with the public." The revised policy clarifies that NASA experts may speak freely to the news media about their research. A majority of survey respondents are aware of their rights, although some reported that they do not feel they can speak freely to the media. **NASA has come a long way, and continued leadership and emphasis on openness will help solidify its gains.**

**Media Policy.** It is encouraging that NASA Administrator Griffin has responded to complaints from NASA scientists that they are being muzzled when attempting to speak to the media and the public. Perhaps as a result of the revised media policy, the majority of NASA climate scientists who responded to an unrelated 2006 Union of Concerned Scientists survey said recent policies affirming scientific openness at their agency have improved the environment for climate research. The new NASA media policy needs improvement in a number of significant ways, but it is a step in the right direction. For more information, [view the policies and our methodology](#).

#### Quotes from NASA Scientists.

"NASA is recovering from the Jim Hansen media debacle and has acted strongly to prevent a recurrence, however few NASA scientists are called upon to talk to the media - this is heavily controlled and only the best entertainers following the party line are chosen."

"In cases where I have talked to the press without approval I have been jawboned by management and told that this will negatively impact my annual review."

"In one instance a reporter specifically asked to speak to me and was told I was unavailable. Another person was suggested in my place."

"[T]here have been very unpleasant events about climate change. I have avoided making public statements, but many NASA official statements underestimate the danger and the difficulty of avoiding catastrophic climate change. I believe they explain this as saying the material given to the press should be consistent with the policy of the executive. I would have thought the policy should have been consistent with the science--but I'm old fashioned I guess."

"I do not consider it worth the risk to my job to make public controversial statements about climate change, the main area in which I am currently working."



“I have been a climate researcher with NASA for over two decades and the last 8 years are the first attempts at ‘control’ of NASA public affairs that I had seen. I primarily experienced this through interactions with center public affairs officials who were very frustrated by the increased NASA HQ ‘control’ of the messages going out. It has improved since Jim Hansen issue, but has not yet returned to levels prior to the [George W.] Bush administration.”

### Examples.

In a separate 2006 survey by the Union of Concerned Scientists, 41 NASA climate scientists said that NASA requires public affairs officials to monitor scientists’ communications with the media. Eleven said they had experienced pressure to eliminate the words “climate change,” “global warming,” and/or similar terms. [Click for more statistics and other information.](#)

In September 2004, NASA scientist Dr. Drew Shindell submitted a press release to announce the publication of a paper on climate change in Antarctica. Press officers significantly watered down language that described his findings to the point that Dr. Shindell’s research was no longer newsworthy. When Shindell inquired about the delays and alterations to the release, press officers responded that releases were being delayed because two political appointees and the White House were now reviewing all climate related press releases. [Click for more information.](#)

Dr. Shindell also provided written testimony to the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee that in the fall of 2004 NASA began requiring press officers to monitor all interviews, either in person or on the phone, and that White House political appointees were reviewing all climate change press releases coming out of the agency. [Click for more information.](#)

At a December 2005 lecture, Dr. James Hansen, the long-time director of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies, called for drastic reductions in heat-trapping gases linked to climate change. Following his lecture, politically appointed public affairs officials began reviewing and filtering his public statements and press interviews. After a January 2006 *New York Times* article revealed efforts to prevent Dr. Hansen from speaking about the science behind global warming, NASA Administrator Michael Griffin issued an agency-wide statement clarifying that the role of public affairs officers was not “to alter, filter or adjust engineering or scientific material produced by NASA’s technical staff.” This statement was followed, on March 30, by an official new policy that purports to uphold the right of open communication between scientists and the media. [Click for more information.](#)

In a 2007 interview conducted by the Union of Concerned Scientists, an anonymous NASA scientist spoke of a press release written by a public affairs officer (PAO) that was ready to be posted to the NASA website. When the press release, which was about research into the impact of climate-related flooding on agriculture, was sent for a higher level of review, it was rejected without explanation. The scientist, believing the results to be significant, had to ask high-level colleagues to lobby to get the release approved. [Click for more information.](#)