

# Freedom to Speak?

## A Report Card on Federal Agency Media Policies

### Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

POLICY

A

PRACTICE

Needs  
Improvement

The CDC's official information and communications policies are excellent, with provisions that allow scientists to state their personal views and review press releases describing their research. Yet in many cases practice diverges from policy. Survey respondents generally did not agree that they are allowed to speak freely to the media, and most doubted that they could state their personal views without fear of retaliation. **A clearly stated commitment to scientific openness from CDC leadership would help bring the agency's practices in line with its policy.**

**Media Policy.** CDC had the best official media policies that we reviewed. We gave the agency policies high marks in most categories, but noted that they did not explicitly guarantee some rights and did not mention the federal anti-gag statute or whistleblower provisions. For more information, [view the policies and our methodology](#).

#### Quotes from CDC Scientists.

“Most of the time [the CDC’s media policy] seems to be consistent, however, with highly charged issues, the agency has buckled to political pressure.”

“CIO's [Chief Information Officers] have power to kill publications if they don't like the message by not clearing the manuscript, and sometimes do, even when it is good science.”

“Upper management levels in CDC right now are cautious to the point of stifling intellectual pursuits of the scientists.... My division does not exactly prohibit communication, but it takes an extremely narrow view of what we should be thinking about, what constitutes appropriate subject material.”

“Non-controversial information is released with a minimal communications plan, but things that are potentially controversial, because they touch on either agency performance or products to be used by the public, undergo an extensive communications plan. If results don't agree with policies in the administration, further levels of lengthy review are required, which can take up to seven years.”

“The biggest problem...is delaying information as these things get hung up in multiple levels of review. As of the past three years, research survey instruments have to be approved by OMB regardless of topic if we ask the same questions of more than 9 persons. This regulation uses the authority of the Paperwork Reduction Act, but it has effectively added at least a year to the review process and discourages use of surveys, which impacts the collection of important information.”



“I think we are too hesitant to work with the media. I think many in the agency, including higher-ups are too wary of the media and view the media as an enemy. I strongly disagree. I believe you must work closely with the media and try to get the media to join you in the fight for public health and social justice...Our mandate is to promote public health, not to be ‘balanced.’ We need to work with others who are seeking to improve public health, and that tends to be the activist community, not industry--that’s just the way it is. So to seek a so-called ‘objective’ view that balances industry needs against public needs is not our mandate. We should be an activist agency--that is, actively seeking to promote public health.”

“Upper management has blocked or watered down publications that may not reflect favorably on the Administration.”

### **Example.**

At the instigation of higher-ups in the George W. Bush administration, fact-based information on the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) website was altered to raise scientifically questionable doubt about the efficacy of condoms in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS. [Click for more information.](#)