



Society of Environmental Journalists

1629 K Street NW, Suite 300, Washington, DC 20006
Phone: 202-558-2055 • sej@sej.org • www.sej.org

Board of Directors

President: Sadie Babits
Cronkite News

Vice President, Programs:
Emily Gertz
Drilled News

Vice President, Membership:
Michael Kodas
Independent Journalist

Treasurer, Finance:
Kathiann Kowalski
Independent Journalist

Secretary: Laura Paskus
New Mexico In Focus

Judy Fahys
InsideClimate News

Maya Kapoor
High Country News

Bobby Magill
Bloomberg Environment

Donovan Quintero
Navajo Times

Sara Schonhardt
Internews

Meera Subramanian
Independent Journalist

*Representative for Academic
Membership:* Sara Shipley Hiles
*University of Missouri School of
Journalism*

*Representative for Associate
Membership:* Jennifer Bogo
Audubon

Founding President: Jim Detjen
Michigan State University

Executive Director:
Meaghan E. Parker

President Joseph R. Biden Jr.
Vice President Kamala D. Harris
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Biden and Vice President Harris:

You take office at a moment in history when the nation is in the grips of a public health emergency, a severe economic slump, an urgent need to address systemic racial injustices and the existential threat of global climate change.

We, with the Society of Environmental Journalists, call on you to address another pressing problem, one that can affect how this country deals with all those other challenges. On behalf of our more than 1,500 members and all other journalists, we petition you to commit your administration to restoring openness and transparency throughout the federal government, and by your words and actions, to help restore respect for the vital role journalists play in our democracy.

Over the last four years, fact-based reporting has been repeatedly dismissed as “fake news” and the press denounced as an “enemy of the people.” Hundreds of journalists have been arrested while covering protests; many more have been verbally and physically attacked while just doing their jobs, with the tacit and at times open approval of former President Donald Trump and his administration and supporters.

That has not been your practice throughout your careers as public servants, but we hope you’ll use your positions of national leadership now to push back against that poisonous climate of mistrust and hostility.

Simply declaring publicly, early on in your term, your respect for the role of the press and pledging to run an open administration would be a good first step, but it’s far from enough. The Trump administration carried secrecy and unresponsiveness to news media to new levels, but the practice of controlling information began long before and has spread and grown through multiple administrations, including the Obama-Biden era. It’s an insidious problem that has reached crisis proportions.

We urge you to take the following steps and see that they’re carried out throughout all departments, agencies and offices:

- Appoint people to the White House press office, including the press secretary, who at the very least adhere to truth-telling, responsiveness and openness. Restore daily briefings. Appoint similarly responsive, open truth-tellers to agency press offices.

- Publicly declare and ensure that agency employees (especially scientists and other subject-matter experts) are free – encouraged even – to talk directly with reporters without press office permission or minders about the public service in which they are engaged.
- Issue an executive order directing agencies to review and revise their Freedom of Information Act regulations, thus reversing Trump-era restrictions and restoring adherence to the FOIA Improvement Act of 2016, the foundation of which is a presumption of openness. Special attention to the Environmental Protection Agency and Interior Department is critical. Clear the FOIA request backlogs that have grown over the last four years.
- Work with Congress on legislation to pass the Journalist Protection Act or a similar measure to outlaw assault and harassment of journalists. Direct federal law enforcement officers to avoid physical harm to journalists. Support federal “shield law” legislation legalizing a strong “reporter’s privilege” to keep confidential sources confidential.

For the sake of our democracy, it’s time to lower the information barriers, stop the spin, condemn violence against journalists and restore transparency and accountability. You won’t like every story published or aired, but that’s the price – and the measure – of a free society.

President Biden and Vice President Harris, we call on you to lead the way in restoring the public’s trust in the information it gets from and about its government.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sadie Babits". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Sadie Babits
President
Society of Environmental Journalists