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Contacts: Peter Sussman (510) 872-0898
Linda Jue (415) 445-0230 ext. 107

**AN OPEN LETTER
ON JUDITH MILLER AND ANONYMOUS SOURCES**

From the Northern California Pro Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists

The New York Times has admitted putting its legal support for reporter Judith Miller above its responsibility to inform readers about an issue of pre-eminent national importance. Similarly, the Society of Professional Journalists, at its recent convention, chose to put its commendable support of a journalists' shield law above its ethical responsibility to "clarify and explain news coverage and invite dialogue with the public over journalistic conduct." We hope to set the record straight on behalf of conscientious journalists around the country who support journalists' First Amendment responsibilities but are deeply troubled by Miller's earlier unprofessional conduct and SPJ's failure to fully apply its own Code of Ethics to this case.

At its recent convention in Las Vegas, SPJ gave Miller its First Amendment Award and lauded her sacrifice in choosing to serve jail time in defense of a free press.

Journalists are ethically bound to keep promises to their sources, as Miller has done. Protecting journalists against government demands for information from sources who were promised confidentiality is a paramount professional obligation and a precondition of a free press. With its First Amendment Award to Miller, the Society intended to underline that message. Unfortunately, in this case, the message has been sullied by the ethical misdeeds of the messenger.

We deplore the careless and deceptive use of confidential sources, as exemplified in Judith Miller's reporting. We urge journalists to hold each other accountable before the government claims even more sweeping rights to interfere in the editorial process, eroding still further this country's noble ideal of a free press.

The press's watchdog role - so vital to a functioning democracy - demands special attention when reporting on government. The SPJ Code of Ethics calls upon journalists to "be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable." Miller, by contrast, knowingly consented to an attempt to mislead the public by allowing her source, I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, top aide to Vice President Dick Cheney, to hide administration responsibility for attacks on critic Joseph Wilson. In an interview for a story that was never published, Miller granted a request from her source, Libby, to change his pre-agreed attribution from "senior administration official" to "former Hill staffer." The new designation was intentionally misleading.

The SPJ ethics code says that journalists should "always question sources' motives before promising anonymity" and that "the public is entitled to as much information as possible on sources' reliability." Miller admitted that she assumed her source was trying to deceive the public with the misleading attribution -- and she gave her consent.

Judith Miller has been quoted in The New York Times as saying, "If your sources are wrong, you are wrong." That statement betrays a profound misunderstanding of the journalist's ethical obligation to "seek truth and report it." Journalists must, as the Code of Ethics words it, "test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error." The public is unable to question a source who hides behind anonymity. This places a heavy burden on the journalist to assure that the charges he or she is passing to the public are indeed credible. Miller failed that test.

Judith Miller's responsibility to her readers was amplified by the momentous consequences of the charges she reported. Her coverage of supposed weapons of mass destruction in Iraq helped the administration make its case for launching a military invasion. Many of Miller's prewar sources turned out to be unreliable witnesses and, worse, self-serving partisans using fabricated evidence. It is irresponsible to relay such grave but anonymous charges without an extraordinary effort to corroborate them by other means.

Miller's repeated reliance on the same suspect sources constituted a breakdown in reporting that was compounded by The Times' prominent display of her credulous reports, its hands-off editing of her dispatches and its failure to insist on multiple sources and rigorous checking.

Journalists have an ethical obligation to resist government or judicial coercion to identify sources who were promised anonymity. But if that obligation is to be credible, we must also willingly accept a responsibility to make good-faith efforts to rigorously verify and qualify all our reporting. Then the public can be assured that information from unidentified sources is not simply self-serving misinformation from people who, by virtue of their anonymity, cannot be held accountable for their words. Ethical journalists provide as much accurate identifying information as possible. And we are duty-bound to critique each other's adherence to strict professional standards.

We endorse the vital importance of shielding journalists' sources from government intrusion. Such a safeguard is essential to the press' role as a government watchdog. At the same time, we invite vigorous public dialogue on appropriate uses of confidentiality in fulfilling this function. We also call upon our colleagues to adhere to SPJ's Code of Ethics, which protects the integrity of journalism while enhancing its quality.

Supported by: Mid-Florida Pro Chapter

This statement was revised to more accurately reflect the SPJ Mid-Florida Pro Chapter's support of our position. In the first version, it was suggested by placement of the chapter name in the headline that the Mid-Florida Pro Chapter co-authored the statement, which they did not.