

NFPW joined other national journalism organizations in signing a letter to Governor Mike Huckabee of Arkansas to object to his using an information-access sanction in retaliation for coverage he does not like. In this case, the sanction is aimed not merely at an individual reporter but at an entire newspaper.

The Coalition of Journalists for Open Government requested that NFPW sign on along with other national journalism organizations and NFPW did this on May 10, 2006.

The Arkansas Times is a weekly newspaper with free distribution. It has the fourth largest circulation of any paper in the state. Its editor, Max Brantley, has some 30 years experience, including 18 at the Arkansas Gazette before joining the Times.

The sanction is a modest one - not sending timely notice of the governor's press conferences and public appearances - but it is nonetheless a totally inappropriate step toward restrictions on access to information in retaliation for unfavorable coverage, and if it stands may be only a first step that will encourage Gov. Huckabee and perhaps other elected officials to implement other sanctions on information access.

The following letter is designed to let the governor know that the nation's media believe he has stepped over the line that, however great his personal pique, should not be crossed.

This is a copy of the letter to Governor Huckabee.

The Honorable Mike Huckabee
Governor's Office
State Capitol Room 250
Little Rock, Arkansas 72201

Dear Governor Huckabee:

The undersigned national journalism organizations are dismayed by your actions in selectively excluding certain media from the list of those notified in advance of your press conferences and other public appearances, simply because of your personal disregard for a particular publication. You are, of course, entitled to your own opinions and to express your disagreement, but we believe it is poor public policy for any governor or any public official to inhibit access to public information, directly or indirectly, simply because he or she dislikes a particular messenger. It is ultimately the citizen who is less informed and penalized as a result.

We take exception, as well, to the declaration on your website that the Arkansas Times is not a "legitimate" newspaper. The fact that it has the fourth highest circulation of any newspaper in your state suggests it has been widely accepted by Arkansas residents and that it has earned the confidence of many of your constituents. But our concern goes beyond that. The word "legitimate" has a precise definition and when its use is combined with an action that can only be seen as an official gubernatorial sanction, the result strikes a blow at free expression and at the core of our democracy, the First Amendment.

We urge you in your official capacity as governor to treat the Arkansas Times as you do all other media regularly covering the Capitol by providing them with the same notice of public appearances and in the same manner, and to not in any other way inhibit the free flow of public information that is so critical to our system of governance.