

New Jersey chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists

Motion addressing the chapter's position on the recent government attacks on the New York Times following an article it published exposing the government's bank-monitoring program:

Whereas the Society of Professional Journalists advocates and defends freedom of the press and the rights of journalists across the world.

Whereas on June 23, 2006, The New York Times, as well as other newspapers published articles exposing a government program that monitors financial transactions as a way to track potential terrorists and those with ties to terrorist organizations. The Times story, by Eric Lichtblau and James Risen, was headlined "Bank Data Sifted in Secret by U.S. to Block Terror."

Immediately after the published articles appeared, verbal attacks began on the New York Times, criticizing their decision to expose the program. Government officials called for an investigation into and prosecution of the New York Times for allegedly committing various crimes by publishing the article, including treason. On June 29, the House of Representatives passed a resolution that, without mentioning any news organization by name, condemned the disclosure and publication of classified information "that impairs the international fight against terrorism."

The executive board of the New Jersey Society of Professional Journalists believes the attack on the New York Times is appalling and uncalled for. As a news organization operating independently of the United States government and working on behalf of the public, the Times and all other news media have a right to objectively seek and report on information of national and international interest.

Verbal attacks by government and elected officials on this newspaper steers perilously close to a violation Bill of Rights and the freedom of speech it provides. For government officials to say the New York Times should be charged with treason is outrageous.

While reasonable people may disagree about the content, fairness and accuracy of the reporting by the Times and other media, as well as the Times's decision to publish the story over administration objections, use of words like "treason" and threatening a newspaper with prosecution represent a dangerous escalation in the necessary tension between press and government. A continuation along this path will inevitably lead to a chilling of voices independent of government authority and a de-facto repeal of the First Amendment -- leaving us minus the precious freedom millions have fought for, and restoring a piece of the tyranny we overthrew 230 years ago.

As the Wall Street Journal put it, in a June 30 editorial which otherwise condemned the Times' publication of the story, "Once a government starts indicting reporters for publishing stories, there will be no drawing any lines against such prosecutions, and we

will be well down the road to an Official Secrets Act that will let government dictate coverage." The Journal, along with the Los Angeles Times, ran stories about the bank monitoring program the same day as the New York Times.

NJSPJ fully recognizes the press's responsibility to withhold information which might directly put soldiers and citizens' lives at risk, such as specific advance word on troop movements or the breaking of codes used by enemies in combat. Neither the New York Times' nor the other stories in question came close to this level of disclosure.

As a result, the New Jersey chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists throws their full support behind the New York's Times, as well as other news organizations', decision to publish the article.