

Jason Leopold: The Fight of a FOIA Terrorist

The Power of FOIA Reporting—Part 1

Jason Leopold is a groundbreaking investigative reporter currently for BuzzFeed News, formerly of VICE News. Leopold has made a name for himself in the media industry, as well as in the federal government sector, as a “[FOIA terrorist](#),” with his ongoing persistent pursuit of government documents concerning important government behavior that are unavailable to, and some would say hidden from, the American public. In [data collected](#) by the Poynter Institute, Leopold ranks second only behind *The New York Times* for top media FOIA filers in the past 15 years.

In 2013, Leopold produced [a four-part series](#) for Al-Jazeera America that used a leaked document to reveal controversial treatment and torture of Guantanamo Bay inmates that the government, allegedly, had misled the public concerning specifics and evaluation of the level of involvement some inmates had in the Al-Qaeda hierarchy. In 2011, Leopold published an investigative piece, “[Jesus Loves Nukes](#),” that spurred major public attention regarding the U.S. Air Force and its use of religious teachings and the work of a former Nazi Party officer to educate young missile officers about the morals and ethics of launching nuclear weapons. In response, the U.S. Air Force [officially withdrew](#) the training program in question the following week. In 2014, Leopold wrote an investigative piece detailing information he obtained through a FOIA request that [released the highly-classified](#) Department of Justice white paper granting the CIA the authority to kill a US citizen abroad. These examples result from only a very small percentage of the FOIA requests that Leopold submits on a weekly basis.

- Considering only a fraction of Leopold’s FOIA requests receive actual documents, what do you think of the scope of government concealment of information?

- Leopold speaks of the active evasion of releasing documents by the government—and that those that are released, are often heavily redacted. Should there be stricter regulation of the government’s ability to deny information requests?
- How does Leopold reflect the necessity and importance of journalistic courage, especially when dealing with a large organizational giant such as the U.S. government?

Seeking Greater Truth and Transparency—Part 2

Jason Leopold is perhaps known most notably for [filing the Freedom of Information Act request](#) that spurred the State Department on the process to release all 52,000 pages of Hillary Clinton’s emails. On November 4, 2014, he submitted a FOIA request to the U.S. State Department seeking all of Hillary Clinton’s emails during her four-year run as secretary of state. Leopold referenced that Clinton would run for president and, therefore, wanted inform the public about the presidential candidate by reporting information about how she performed as secretary of state. When the State Department wouldn’t release the emails, Leopold sued the department in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C. Over the course of the next year and a half, all of the emails were released to the public, launching one of the most controversial issues that occurred during the presidential election.

In December 2016, on the heels of the presidential election, Leopold [filed a FOIA request](#) seeking information about government knowledge of Russian interference in the presidential election via hacking into the Democratic National Committee and the email account of John Podesta, Hillary Clinton’s campaign manager. A lawsuit was filed on December 26th against the CIA, FBI, Department of Homeland Security and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence for failure to comply with the FOIA request.

- How do these two investigative pursuits reflect the need for courageous action by journalists now more than ever?
- Should such persistent action be required to get the federal government to release information that is of utter, immediate interest to the American public?

- Should the interference of Russian intelligence in the U.S. presidential election be taken more seriously by the media and government?

Freedom of Information and the Current Political Landscape—Part 3

The following passage is an excerpt from [an investigative piece](#) by Jason Leopold for BuzzFeed News regarding the FOIA request and subsequent lawsuit he filed, along with Michael Shapiro, as a response to the government's refusal to release documents concerning Russian interference in the presidential election.

“What the agency turned over to us and Ryan Shapiro, a PhD candidate at MIT and a research affiliate at Harvard University, is truly bizarre: a two-page intelligence assessment of the incident, dated Aug. 22, 2016, that contains information DHS culled from the internet...What's troubling about shrouding these unclassified documents in such secrecy is that U.S. officials continue to leak details about Russia's influence in the presidential election, while fiercely resisting attempts to pry loose documentary evidence that would give the public a firm sense of what the government actually knows.”

Leopold asserts that the Department of Homeland Security knows something about the hack into the Democratic Party's servers, but are aggressively declining to reveal more than two pages of heavily redacted unclassified information. Leopold is [still pursuing a broader release of information](#) regarding this controversy; therefore, it is still an evolving investigative look into the government, this presidential election and the role of the media as a watchdog over both.

- Are FOIA requests and reporting using FOIA request information a mechanism of journalistic courage or, as some agencies and officials have alluded, a tool solely to personally benefit by pointing the finger at the federal government?
- Is the media in danger of being censored or silenced in this current political landscape?

- In what ways can the media respond to the growing criticism that has been received during and after this recent presidential election?

Conclusion

Journalistic courage is linked very closely with being able to make hard decisions, not backing down in face of adversity and being committed to doing what is necessary to inform the public. Jason Leopold is one example of that ideal, as he has become deeply entrenched in a long-term match against a mass machine that is hard to regulate, often opposed to outsider inquiries and inclined to withhold sensitive information, even if the public deserves to know—namely, the agencies that help give organization and regulation to the American public’s lives. It is difficult to have the courage to fight against that of which is supposed to be responsible for your well-being, yet it is necessary to do so in order to keep the system less secretive and all-powerful than other forms of government. Our current president just recently announced that he will be skipping the annual White House Correspondents’ Dinner—a strong reflection of the changing, and troubling, media landscape amid growing government scorn. Now more than ever, it is imperative for journalists to possess and exercise courage in order to hold the government and its officials accountable. Follow updates on Jason Leopold’s FOIA requests and reporting on his Twitter account: @JasonLeopold.

Sources

Part 1 (in order of appearance)

[The Secret to Getting Top-Secret Secrets](#)

[Here are the journalists fighting for federal public records](#)

[Exclusive: The Abu Zubaydah Diaries](#)

["Jesus Loves Nukes"](#)

[Air Force Pulls "Jesus Loves Nukes" Ethics Training](#)

[A Justice Department Memo Provides the CIA's Legal Justification to Kill a US Citizen](#)

Part 2 (in order of appearance)

[How I Got Clinton's Emails](#)

[Journalist Suing U.S. Spy Agencies](#)

Part 3 (in order of appearance)

[What's The Department Of Homeland Security Hiding?](#)

[Thwarting Freedom of Information](#)

Conclusion

[Trump Says He Will Hold Rally While Skipping Correspondents' Dinner](#)