

The Intercept_

Ken Silverstein

September 4 2014, 1:22 p.m.



A prominent national security reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* rou-

tinely submitted drafts and detailed summaries of his stories to CIA press handlers prior to publication, according to documents obtained by *The Intercept*.

Email exchanges between CIA public affairs officers and Ken Dilanian, now an Associated Press intelligence reporter who previously covered the CIA for the *Times*, show that Dilanian enjoyed a closely collaborative relationship with the agency, explicitly promising positive news coverage and sometimes sending the press office entire story drafts for review prior to publication. In at least one instance, the CIA's reaction appears to have led to significant changes in the story that was eventually published in the *Times*.

“I’m working on a story about congressional oversight of drone strikes that can present a good opportunity for you guys,” Dilanian [wrote in one email to a CIA press officer](#), explaining that what he intended to report would be “reassuring to the public” about CIA drone strikes. In another, after a series of back-and-forth emails about a pending story on CIA operations in Yemen, he [sent a full draft of an unpublished report](#) along with the subject line, “does this look better?” In another, he directly [asks the flack](#): “You wouldn’t put out disinformation on this, would you?”

[redacted]
From: Dilanian, Ken [redacted]
Sent: Tuesday, March 06, 2012 11:48 AM
To: [redacted]
Subject: RE: what can you tell me about this?

OK, thanks. And you wouldn't put out disinformation on this would you? If it was true and you didn't want to confirm it, you'd say, "No comment?" I ask only because covert operations are supposed to be deniable, right?

From: [redacted]
Sent: Tuesday, March 06, 2012 11:47 AM
To: Dilanian, Ken
Subject: RE: what can you tell me about this?

Ken,

[redacted]

[redacted]
Media Spokesperson
CIA Office of Public Affairs

Dilanian's emails were included in [hundreds of pages of documents](#) that the CIA turned over in response to two FOIA requests seeking records on the agency's interactions with reporters. They include email exchanges with reporters for the Associated Press, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and other outlets. In addition to Dilanian's deferential relationship with the CIA's press handlers, the documents show that the agency regularly invites journalists to its McLean, Va., headquarters for briefings and other events. Reporters who have addressed the CIA include the *Washington Post*'s David Ignatius, the former ombudsmen for the *New York Times*, NPR, and *Washington Post*, and Fox News' Brett Baier, Juan Williams, and Catherine Herridge.

Dilanian left the *Times* to join the AP last May, and the emails released by the CIA only cover a few months of his tenure at the *Times*. They

show that in June 2012, shortly after 26 members of congress wrote [a letter](#) to President Obama saying they were “deeply concerned” about the drone program, Dilanian approached the agency about story that he pitched as “a good opportunity” for the government.

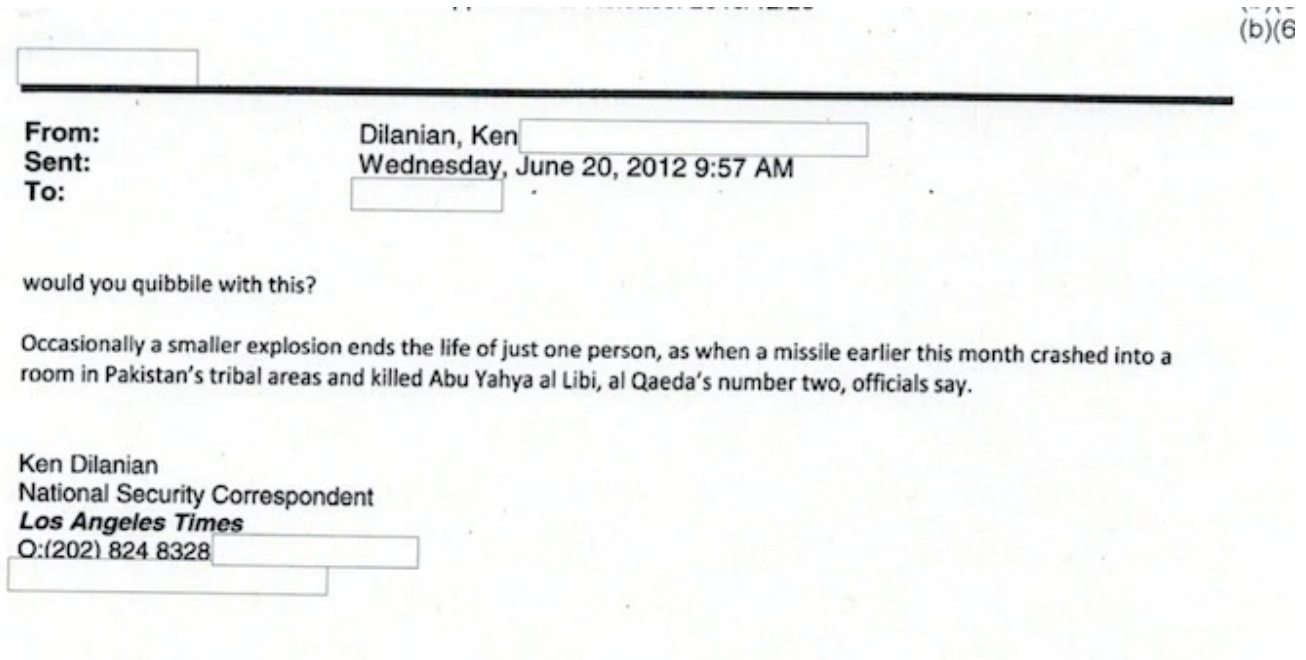
The letter from lawmakers, which was sent in the wake of a flurry of drone strikes that had reportedly killed dozens of civilians, suggested there was no meaningful congressional oversight of the program. But Dilanian wrote that he had been “told differently by people I trust.” He added:

Not only would such a story be reassuring to the public, I would think, but it would also be an opportunity to explore the misinformation about strikes that sometimes comes out of local media reports. It’s one thing for you to say three killed instead of 15, and it’s another for congressional aides from both parties to back you up. Part of what the story will do, if you could help me bring it to fruition, is to quote congressional officials saying that great care is taken to avoid collateral damage and that the reports of widespread civilian casualties are simply wrong.

Of course, journalists routinely curry favor with government sources (and others) by falsely suggesting that they intend to amplify the official point of view. But the emails show that Dilanian really meant it.

Over the next two weeks, he sent additional emails requesting assistance and information from the agency. In one, he suggested that a New America Foundation report alleging that drone attacks had killed many civilians was exaggerated, writing that the report was “[all wrong, correct?](#)”

A number of early [news accounts](#) reported that more than a dozen people died in the June 4, 2012, drone strike that killed Al Qaeda leader Abu Yahya al-Libi in Pakistan. But in a June 20 email to the CIA, Dilanian shared a sentence from his story draft asserting that al-Libi had died alone. “[Would you quibble with this?](#)” he asked the CIA press officer.



On June 25, the *Times* published Dilanian’s [story](#), which described thorough congressional review of the drone program and said legislative aides were allowed to watch high-quality video of attacks and review intelligence used to justify each strike. Needless to say, the agency hadn’t quibbled with Dilanian’s description of al-Libi’s solitary death. Video provided by the CIA to congressional overseers, Dilanian reported, “shows that he alone was killed.”

That claim was subsequently debunked. In October of 2013, Amnesty International issued a [report](#), based on statements from eyewitnesses and survivors, that the first missile strike targeting al-Libi killed five

men and wounded four others. Al-Libi was not even among those victims; he and up to fifteen other people died in a follow up attack when they arrived at the scene to assist victims. Some of those killed were very likely members of al Qaeda, but six were local tribesmen who Amnesty believed were there only as rescuers. Another field [report](#) published around the same time, this one by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, also reported follow-up drone strikes on civilians and rescue workers – attacks that constitute war crimes.

Dilanian has done some strong work and has at times been highly critical of the CIA. For example, in July 2012 he wrote a [piece](#) about sexual harassment at the agency that angered the press office. [In reply to an email](#) from a spokesperson, Dilanian said that complaints about his story were “especially astonishing given that CIA hides the details of these complaints behind a wall of secrecy.”

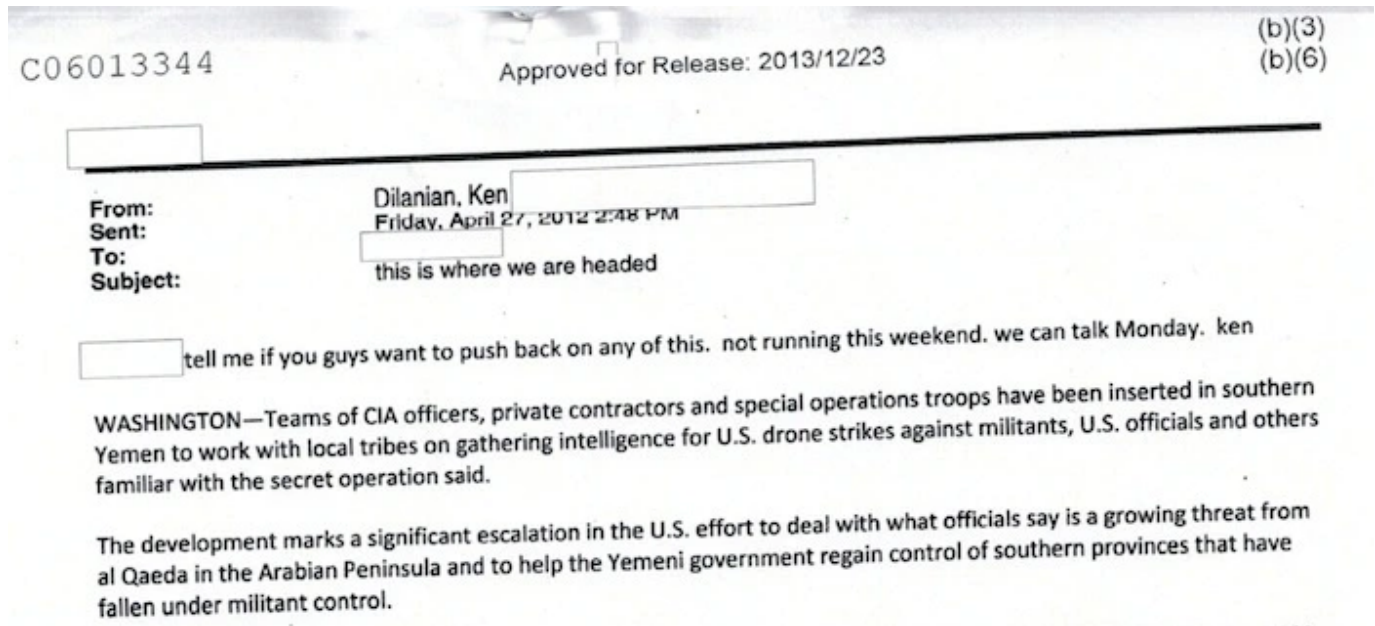
But the emails reveal a remarkably collegial relationship with the agency. “I am looking forward to working with you, Ken,” a newly hired agency flack wrote him in a March 1, 2012, email.

“Hooray!” [Dilanian replied](#). “Glad to have you guys.”

On March 14, 2012, Dilanian sent an email to the press office with a link to a *Guardian* [story](#) that said Bashar Al-Assad’s wife had been buying a fondue set on Amazon while Syrian protesters were gunned down. “If this is you guys, nice work,” [he wrote](#). “If it’s real, even better.”

The emails also show that Dilanian shared his work with the CIA before it was published, and invited the agency to request changes. On Friday April 27, 2012, [he emailed the press office a draft story](#) that he and a colleague, David Cloud, were preparing. The subject line was

“this is where we are headed,” and he asked if “you guys want to push back on any of this.”



It appears the agency did push back. On May 2, 2012, he [emailed the CIA a new opening to the story](#) with a subject line that asked, “does this look better?”

The piece [ran on May 16](#), and while it bore similarities to the earlier versions, it had been significantly softened.

Here’s the original opening, from Dilanian’s email:

Teams of CIA officers, private contractor and special operations troops have been inserted in southern Yemen to work with local tribes on gathering intelligence for U.S. drone strikes against militants, U.S. officials and others familiar with the secret operation said.

Here’s the version that was published:

In an escalation of America's clandestine war in Yemen, a small contingent of U.S. troops is providing targeting data for Yemeni airstrikes as government forces battle to dislodge Al Qaeda militants and other insurgents in the country's restive south, U.S. and Yemeni officials said.

In another case, Dilanian [sent the press office a draft story](#) on May 4, 2012, reporting that U.S. intelligence believed the Taliban was growing stronger in Afghanistan. "Guys, I'm about to file this if anyone wants to weigh in," he wrote.

On May 7, 2012, the AP, Dilanian's current employer, broke a [story](#) about a secret CIA operation that "thwarted an ambitious plot by al-Qaida's affiliate in Yemen to destroy a U.S.-bound airliner." The next day, Dilanian sent the CIA a [detailed summary of a planned piece](#) that followed up on (and took issue with) the AP story. "This is what we are planning to report, and I want to make sure you wouldn't push back against any of it," he wrote.

Dilanian also closely collaborated with the CIA in a May 2012 story that minimized the agency's cooperation with director Kathryn Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal on their film about the assassination of Osama bin Laden, *Zero Dark Thirty*. Republicans had been criticizing the Obama Administration for revealing classified details about the operation to Boal and Bigelow while withholding them from the public.

"My angle on this is that...this is a pretty routine effort to cooperate with filmmakers and the sort of thing the CIA has been doing for 15 years," Dilanian [wrote in an email to Cynthia Rapp](#), the head of the agency's press office. "This is a storyline that is in your interest, I

would think, to the extent you could provide information about how routine it is to offer guidance to entertainment people who seek it out – including ones who are Democrats! – it would show that this latest episode is hardly a scandal.”

Dilanian’s pitch appears to have worked. His subsequent [story](#) included an on the record comment from CIA spokesman Todd Ebitz. One year later, [internal CIA documents](#) released under the FOIA showed that the agency’s office of public affairs – the same people Dilanian had been working with–had asked for and received changes to the *Zero Dark Thirty* script that portrayed the agency in a more favorable light.

Reached by *The Intercept* for comment, Dilanian said that the AP does not permit him to send stories to the CIA prior to publication, and he acknowledged that it was a bad idea. “I shouldn’t have done it, and I wouldn’t do it now,” he said. “[But] it had no meaningful impact on the outcome of the stories. I probably should’ve been reading them the stuff instead of giving it to them.”

Dilanian said he was not sure if *Los Angeles Times* rules allow reporters to send stories to sources prior to publication. [The Time’s ethics guidelines](#), however, clearly forbid the practice: “We do not circulate printed or electronic copies of stories outside the newsroom before publication. In the event you would like to read back quotations or selected passages to a source to ensure accuracy, consult an editor before doing so....”

Bob Drogin, the *Times*’ deputy bureau chief and national security editor, said he had been unaware that Dilanian had sent story drafts to the CIA and would have not allowed him to do it. “Ken is a diligent

reporter and it's responsible to seek comment and response to your reporting," he told me. "But sharing story drafts is not appropriate."

AP spokesman Paul Colford told *The Intercept* that the news organization is "satisfied that any pre-publication exchanges that Ken had with the CIA before joining AP were in pursuit of accuracy in his reporting on intelligence matters," adding that "we do not coordinate with government agencies on the phrasing of material."

Dilanian's emails were included in a FOIA request that sought communications between the CIA and ten national security reporters sent from March to July 2012. That request turned up correspondence between the press office and Dilanian, Adam Goldman, then at the AP and now at *The Washington Post*, Matt Apuzzo, then at AP and now at *The New York Times*, Brian Bennett of *The Los Angeles Times*, Siobhan Gorman of *The Wall Street Journal*, Scott Shane of the *New York Times*, and David Ignatius, a *Washington Post* columnist.

It's impossible to know precisely how the CIA flacks responded to reporters' queries, because the emails show only one side of the conversations. The CIA redacted virtually all of the press handlers' replies other than meager comments that were made explicitly on the record, citing the CIA Act of 1949, which exempts the agency from having to disclose "intelligence sources and methods" or "the organization, functions, names, official titles, salaries, or numbers of personnel employed by the Agency." The contents of off-the-record or background emails from CIA press handlers clearly don't disclose names, titles, or salaries (which can easily be redacted anyway); they may disclose sources and methods, depending on whether you view manipulation of American reporters as an intelligence method. (*The Intercept* is appealing the redactions.)

-----Original message-----

[Redacted]

Hey Ken,

[Redacted]

Please feel free to report we declined comment. Thanks.

Take care,

[Redacted]

Media Spokesperson
CIA Office of Public Affairs

[Redacted]

The emails also show that the CIA [asked the Post's Ignatius to speak at a May 2012 off-the-record conference](#), "Political Islam's Future: Challenges, Choices, and Uncertainties," for U.S. government intelligence analysts and policymakers. The invitation was extended in an email from the press office, which said that the conference organizers "would like you to draw upon the insight from your field experience, reporting, and broad network of contacts during the lead up to the Arab Spring to share how journalists sense that major political, social, or religious changes are in the making."

[Ignatius replied](#) that he would be "pleased and honored to do this," but unfortunately he would be traveling in Europe on the day of the conference. The CIA then proposed "a smaller round table with our... folks sometime in the future."

"Smaller round table would be great," [Ignatius replied](#).

Ignatius told *The Intercept* that the round table never took place. But

he confirmed that he had previously spoken to the CIA twice since 2005. “I talked to them about how journalists collect information,” he said. “It was meant as an admonition and a caution about the need to get things right and not to bend to political pressure and to have systems in place to catch errors.”

Ignatius said he had gotten approval of his editors before he spoke to the CIA, and didn’t see any conflict or problem with addressing the agency. “There’s a very sharp line between our profession and the intelligence business and it shouldn’t be crossed,” he said. “I talked to them about what I’d learned as an editor and the importance of getting it right. I wasn’t sharing any [sensitive] information with them.

Records released in response to another FOIA request, seeking information about journalists who had been invited to address or debrief CIA employees, show that several Fox News reporters have visited the agency.

Fox News’ Bret Baier [gave an address about the importance of charity](#) in 2008 (which was [reported at the time](#)), and the then-ombudsmen for NPR, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times* (Jeffrey Dvorkin, Michael Getler and Daniel Okrent, respectively), [appeared together on a CIA panel](#). The event description said that journalism “shares some of the same missions that intelligence analysts have – presenting information in an unbiased fashion and challenging prevailing opinions.” The ombudsmen, the invitation said, could help the CIA “see how journalists deal with some of our common professional and ethical difficulties.” (It’s not clear from the documents when the ombudsmen event was held, but it would have been in 2009 or before.)

In 2007, Juan Williams, then at NPR in addition to his role at Fox

News, [gave a “standing-room-only” speech](#) sponsored by the agency’s Office of Diversity Plans and Programs. During his speech Williams praised CIA personnel as “the best and brightest,” and said Americans admired the agency and trusted it “to guide the nation and the nation’s future.”

Williams also spoke about Nelson Mandela, saying he was an example of a leader who “came from outside the system.” There was a certain irony here – the CIA played [a key role in Mandela’s 1962 arrest](#) by the South African apartheid regime, which resulted in him spending 28 years in prison – which Williams was either unaware of or politely chose not to note.

Photo: J. Scott Applewhite/AP

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