



SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS.
P.O. Box 441748
Indianapolis, IN 46244
317.927.8000 | [spj.org](https://www.spj.org)

January 16, 2026

VIA EMAIL

The Honorable Pam Bondi
Attorney General of the United States
pam.bondi@usdoj.gov

Kash Patel
Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation
patelkpp@gmail.com

Dear Ms. Bondi and Mr. Patel:

The Society of Professional Journalists and the undersigned press and civic organizations strongly condemn the FBI's execution of a search warrant at the home of Hannah Natanson, a reporter for The Washington Post. Searching a journalist's home and electronic devices, especially one who is not the subject of a criminal investigation, raises grave concerns under federal law and represents a dangerous escalation in the federal government's recent treatment of journalists. We call on you to explain the legal basis for this action, cease any investigation into Natanson's lawful newsgathering and return any seized material.

On January 14, federal agents searched Natanson's home for classified material in connection to an investigation of accusations that Aurelio Perez-Lugones, a federal system administrator, accessed and took home classified documents, according to the search warrant and FBI affidavit she received.¹ Natanson herself is not the subject of a criminal investigation into leaking or misusing classified materials. She has, however, developed extensive sourcing with the federal workforce, reportedly having communicated with more than 1,000 current and former federal employees as sources for her work.² The confidentiality of those sources is now imperiled by the seizure of her devices.

Dogged reporting about the government is not a crime and is not a valid reason for raiding a reporter's home. The FBI may not subject a journalist to intrusive searches or seizures based on lawful newsgathering or because her reporting advances transparency and accountability in ways that may be uncomfortable for those in power. It is unclear whether Natanson relied on any information from Perez-Lugones in her work, classified or otherwise, but unfounded suspicion that Natanson may have spoken to him or relied on him as a source does not strip her reporting of First Amendment protection,

¹ Perry Stein & Jeremy Roebuck, *FBI executes search warrant at Washington Post reporter's home*, WASHINGTON POST, Jan. 14, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2026/01/14/washington-post-reporter-search/>.

² Hannah Natanson, *I am The Post's 'federal government whisperer.' It's been brutal.*, WASHINGTON POST, Dec. 24, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2026/01/14/washington-post-reporter-search/>.



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regardless of whether Perez-Lugones violated the law himself. As stated by the Supreme Court in *Bartnicki v. Vopper*, “a stranger’s illegal conduct does not suffice to remove the First Amendment shield from speech about a matter of public concern.”³ Consequently, Natanson cannot be deemed guilty only by suspected association.

Federal law provides broad protection from the government’s search and seizure of materials and information used by journalists, such as Natanson, in connection with their work. The Privacy Protection Act of 1980, passed by Congress after law enforcement raided the newsroom of the Stanford Daily for information about a contentious protest, was designed to sharply limit law enforcement searches of journalists’ homes and seizures of their work product. The act permits such searches only under narrowly defined exceptions, including where law enforcement has probable cause to believe the journalist has committed a crime to which the materials relate, or where the search is necessary to prevent death or serious bodily injury.⁴ Natanson’s newsgathering and reporting do not fall within any of these limited exceptions.

The Department of Justice’s own rules explicitly state that a search for information from the media is permitted only where there are “reasonable grounds to believe a crime has occurred, and that the information sought is essential to a successful investigation or prosecution.”⁵ The federal government has not demonstrated that Natanson’s work product is essential to the success of any criminal investigation into Perez-Lugones or otherwise. The updated rules also require reasonable notice of the planned search and state as well that “[t]he subpoena or court order should not be used to obtain peripheral, nonessential, or speculative information.”⁶ The apparent lack of advance notice and sweeping seizure of personal devices—including a fitness tracking watch—raise serious questions about whether the government complied with its own rules requiring avoidance of peripheral, nonessential, or speculative information.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Justice must explain how this action complies with both the letter and the spirit of the Privacy Protection Act, in addition to the DOJ’s own rules, and why less intrusive alternatives were not exhausted before resorting to such an extreme measure as searching Natanson’s home and seizing her devices.

³ *Bartnicki v. Vopper*, 532 U.S. 514, 535 (2001).

⁴ The exceptions do not apply if “the offense to which the materials relate consists of the receipt, possession, communication, or withholding of such materials or the information contained therein,” unless “the offense consists of the receipt, possession, or communication of information relating to the national defense, classified information, or restricted data” under certain specified federal statutes. See Privacy Protection Act of 1980, 42 U.S. Code § 2000aa(a)(1)-(b)(2).

⁵ Policy Regarding Obtaining Information From, or Records of, Members of the News Media; and Regarding Questioning, Arresting, or Charging Members of the News Media, 90 Fed. Reg 18785 (May 2, 2025).

⁶ *Id.*



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SPJ calls on you and the entire federal government to reaffirm its commitment to press freedom and all public officials to remember a fundamental truth: When journalists are silenced, all Americans pay the price.

Signed,

Chris R. Vaccaro
SPJ President

Anne Marie Tamburro
SPJ Press Freedom Strategist

On behalf of the Society of Professional Journalists and the following signatories:

SPJ Professional Chapters of:

- Cleveland
- Detroit
- East Tennessee
- Georgia
- Greater Houston
- Long Island
- Louisiana
- Minnesota
- New England
- Greater Los Angeles
- Oregon
- San Diego
- St. Louis
- Valley of the Sun (Phoenix)
- Washington, DC

American Society of Journalists and Authors

Association of Health Care Journalists

Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)

Defending Rights & Dissent

First Amendment Coalition

First Amendment Foundation



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Freedom of the Press Foundation

International Women's Media Foundation

Journalism and Women Symposium (JAWS)

The Media and Democracy Project

National Association of Science Writers

The National Press Club

The NewsGuild-CWA

PEN America

Radio Television Digital News Association

Society of Environmental Journalists

Student Press Law Center

Whistleblower & Source Protection Program (WHISPeR) at ExposeFacts