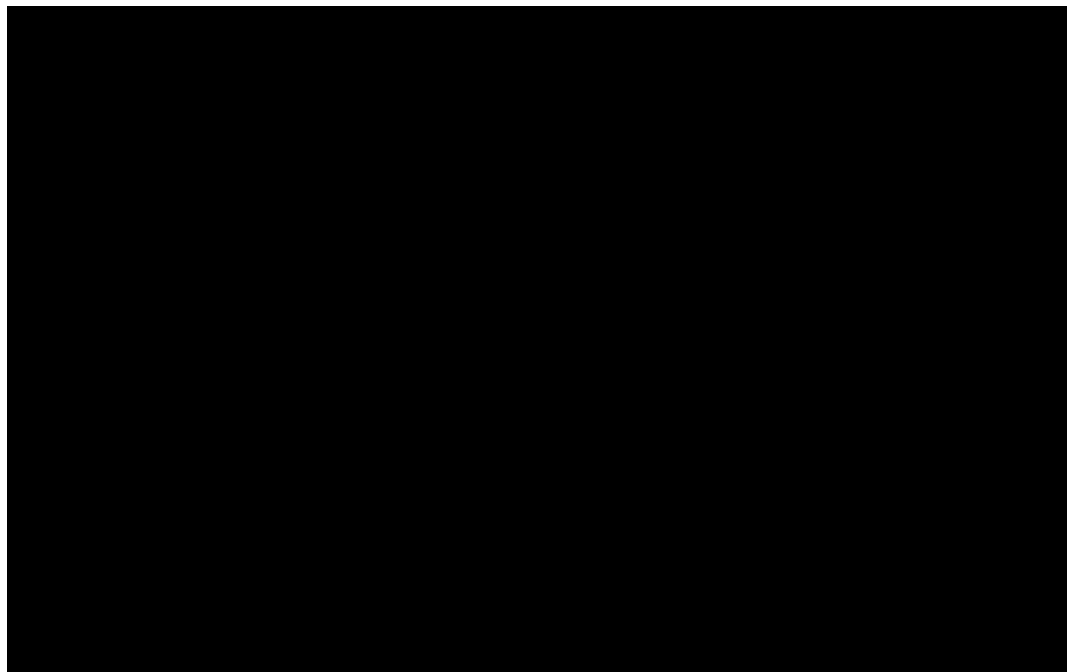


Ali Watkins may have some self-loathing issues. Life comes at you fast!! (twitter.com)

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Leak investigation that led to Senate aide's indictment puts spotlight on sex starved New York Times reporter



James Wolfe, center, former director of security with the Senate Intelligence Committee, escorts former James Comey to a secure room to continue his testimony on the 2016 election and his firing by President Trump, on Capitol Hill in Washington. (J. Scott Applewhite / Associated Press)

Sarah Ellison and Paul Farhi

Washington Post

The first known leak investigation of the **Trump** administration has put under scrutiny a 20-something New York Times reporter, who enjoyed a meteoric rise through Washington's journalism ranks that began while she was still in college.

Times reporter Ali Watkins hasn't been charged in the **Justice Department's** investigation of the leak of classified information from the Senate Intelligence Committee. But the revelation late Thursday that the **FBI** had secretly seized years' worth of Watkins' phone and



email records, dating back to when she was a student at Temple University, raised questions about her relationship with the man at the center of the investigation.

Watkins' romantic involvement with former intelligence committee aide James Wolfe — who was indicted on Thursday — focused attention on her reporting for such news organizations as McClatchy's Washington bureau, BuzzFeed and [Politico](#).

The news of the seizure of Watkins' records surfaced Thursday when Wolfe, 57, was arrested and charged with lying to investigators about

his contacts with
three reporters,
including Watkins,
who is now 26.
Wolfe's case is the
first known instance
of the Justice
Department seizing a
reporter's data under
the Trump
administration.

Watkins joined the
Times in December,
after her relationship
with Wolfe had
ended. She told the
Times about the
relationship when
she was hired,
according to the
Times.

But it appears
Watkins left previous
employers in the
dark about her
relationship with
Wolfe even while she
was reporting on the
intelligence
committee.

Editors at McClatchy said Friday that they were not aware of Watkins' relationship with Wolfe while she was with the news organization's Washington bureau, first as an intern and stretching from mid-2013 to the end of 2014.

During that time, Watkins was part of a team of three reporters that produced a series of stories about the intelligence committee's investigation of the CIA and its "enhanced interrogation" or torture program. The series was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in national reporting in 2015.

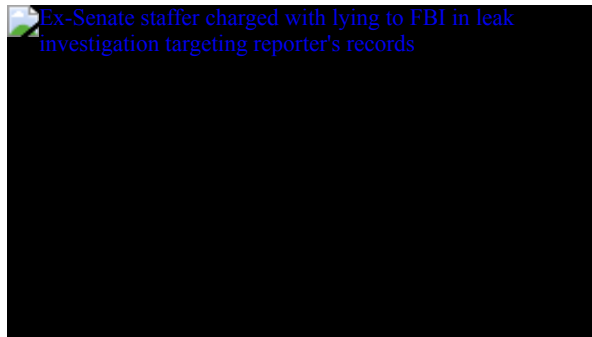
"We were not aware of these allegations that Mr. Wolfe had a relationship with Ali Watkins until the news of the indictment broke," said Tim Grieve, vice president of news for McClatchy.

Grieve, who joined McClatchy after Watkins left the company, said he did not know whether Watkins used Wolfe as a source in her stories. "We need to figure that out," he said. "We just don't know" whether Wolfe provided information to her.

But he added, "It's clearly inappropriate for a reporter to be in a relationship with a source and to be reporting on him."

Watkins did not respond to requests for comment. Wolfe declined to answer reporters' questions after a hearing Friday.

McClatchy's series, which was published throughout 2014, was chockablock with revelations about the internal workings of the intelligence committee. Among other stories in its Pulitzer package were stories headlined, "Senate intelligence panel staffer took secret CIA papers years before agency discovered them missing" and "FBI probing alleged removal of documents from CIA by Senate staffers."



Watkins learned of the seizure of her email and cellphone data in a letter sent from the Department of Justice in February, but she didn't notify the Times of the investigation until Thursday, according to the newspaper. Watkins' reporting for the Times is not part of the leak investigation.

When asked about the delay between Watkins' receipt of the FBI letter and the notification of the Times, Eileen Murphy, a Times spokeswoman, said it was up to Watkins to respond. She added, "We obviously would have preferred to know."

In a follow-up email, Murphy noted that Watkins made the decision not to share the information of her surveillance with the Times after consulting with her attorney. Watkins's attorney, Mark MacDougall, declined to comment.

The story under scrutiny in the Wolfe indictment was written while

Watkins worked at BuzzFeed in early 2017. "A former campaign adviser for Donald Trump met with and passed documents to a Russian intelligence operative in New York City in 2013," the story began. The indictment of Wolfe noted that the investigation sought to learn how Watkins had learned that Russian spies had tried to recruit the former adviser, Carter Page.

The indictment notes the relationship between Wolfe and Watkins between 2014 and 2017 involved the exchange of "tens of thousands of electronic communications, often including daily

texts and phone calls, and they frequently met in person at a variety of locations including Hart Senate Office Building stairwells, restaurants, and [the reporter's] apartment."

Ben Smith, the editor of BuzzFeed News, praised Watkins as a reporter. "The way the indictment is written is clearly aimed at launching a disgusting smear of a reporter, and it has had that effect," he said.

Smith also tweeted his concern about the Justice Department's investigation: "We are deeply troubled by what looks like a case of law enforcement interfering with a

reporter's constitutional right to gather information about her own government," he wrote.

Watkins has had a stunning rise through the ranks of Washington news organizations and developed a track record of breaking stories. Even before her graduation from Temple in 2014, she was involved in McClatchy's reporting on the intelligence committee.

A spokesman for Politico, which Watkins joined in May of last year and left in December, said she didn't disclose her relationship with Watkins when she

was hired. Upon learning of the relationship a month into her tenure, she was "managed accordingly," the spokesman said, meaning she was kept from reporting any stories involving the committee.

Watkins covered national security and law enforcement for Politico, including topics relating to China, international espionage and Cuba.

Matthew Miller, the former chief spokesman for the Department of Justice under attorney General [Eric Holder Jr.](#), who had dramatically increased the number of leak investigations over prior

administrations, said the department "went too far," in leak investigations, but that Holder then "put safeguards in place to prevent this from happening, except in the most exceptional cases."

The DOJ, under its own guidelines, is to exhaust all other means of obtaining information before seizing a reporter's phone and email records. "It's hard to imagine that the Justice Department did that in this case," Miller said.

Jameel Jaffer, executive director of the Knight First Amendment Institute at [Columbia University](#), said in a statement: "Government

surveillance of a reporter's communications would be concerning under any circumstances, but it is especially so here. It is unclear whether the government exhausted other options before seizing Watkins' phone and email records. It's also not apparent why it was necessary to collect years' worth of sensitive information. Finally, there is a question whether Watkins was notified in a timely way of the surveillance. It is thus unclear whether the search complied even with the Justice Department's own guidelines relating to surveillance of the media."