

Washington Post offers its reporters to corporate sponsors

David Walsh
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The *Washington Post*, it was revealed last week, recently offered corporate sponsors—for a hefty fee—the opportunity to meet privately with key reporters, along with Congressional leaders and Obama administration officials. The meetings were to be held over dinner in the “relaxed setting” of *Post* publisher Katharine Weymouth’s Washington home.

A good deal of nonsense is now being aired to the effect that the *Post* “crossed the lines” and “violated journalistic ethics” in this incident. No, the *Post*’s chief offense—which has caused its management a good deal of embarrassment and generated strenuous, if unconvincing, efforts at damage control—is that the newspaper’s offer to sell its reporting staff to corporate bidders effectively sums up the relations that exist between the media, big business and the state. This is America’s “free press.”

The *Post* sent out a flier, whose contents were revealed by Politico.com, to a healthcare lobbyist inviting him to an exclusive “salon” July 21 at Weymouth’s house. The asking price from a corporate sponsor for a single gathering was \$25,000 (the newspaper hoped to have two sponsors each session), with “annual series sponsorship of 11 Salons offered at \$250,000.”

The invitation read: “Bring your organization’s CEO or executive director literally to the table. Interact with key Obama Administration and Congressional leaders . . . Spirited? Yes. Confrontational? No.”

The flier offered firms the chance to meet “health-care reporting and editorial staff members of The Washington Post...An exclusive opportunity to participate in the health-care reform debate among the select few who will actually get it done.”

Exposing more of the truth than it perhaps intended to, the solicitation continued by noting, that the salons “are extensions of The Washington Post brand of journalistic inquiry into the issues, a unique opportunity for stakeholders to hear and be heard.” The *Post* promised an evening of “off-the-record conversation,” adding, “By bringing together those powerful few in business and policy-making who are forwarding, legislating and reporting on the issues, Washington Post Salons give life to the debate. Be at this nexus of business and policy with your underwriting of Washington Post Salons.”

Here you pretty much have it. “The select few who will actually get it [healthcare ‘reform’] done,” “a unique opportunity for stakeholders to hear and be heard,” “bringing together those powerful few in business and policy-making,” “the nexus of

business and policy.”

According to the *Post*’s Howard Kurtz, Kaiser Permanente, the healthcare giant, had “orally agreed” to pay \$25,000 for the July 21 dinner, and Democratic Rep. Jim Cooper of Tennessee, “a longtime player in healthcare reform” (*Los Angeles Times*), had accepted the invitation. Maine’s Republican senator, Olympia Snowe, was also invited, although apparently she had turned down the dinner.

A top *Post* marketing executive, Charles Pelton, indicated that he had invited two dozen business executives, advocates and Barack Obama’s health adviser, Nancy-Ann DeParle.

Where do the American people stand in all this? Nowhere. In this particular case, the newspaper, one of the most authoritative in the country, was helping organize—for its own financial gain—the dismantling of public health care and the enrichment of the healthcare giants entirely behind the backs of the population. Presumably similar get-togethers on other critical economic, political and foreign policy issues were in the offing.

Caught out in its corrupt operation, the *Post* cancelled the event and Weymouth and executive editor Marcus Brauchli issued statements distancing themselves from Pelton and his marketing department. Weymouth, who was named publisher and chief executive of the paper—once operated by her grandmother, Katharine Graham—in February 2008 acknowledged the plans for the salons, but insisted that they were intended to have parameters “such that we did not in any way compromise our integrity. Sponsorship of events, like advertising in the newspaper, must be at arm’s length and cannot imply control over the content or access to our journalists.”

On Sunday she apologized to the *Post*’s readers in a statement published in the paper, writing that the flier sent out “suggested that we were selling access to power brokers in Washington through dinners that were to take place at my home.” Weymouth went on to assert, that despite the episode, “The Washington Post remains committed, now and always, to the highest standards of journalistic integrity. Nothing is more important to us than that, and nothing will shake that commitment.”

Brauchli insisted to Politico.com, “Our mission in the news department is to serve an audience, not serve our sponsors. We do not use the *Post*’s name or our journalists to gain access to officials or sources for the benefit of non-news purposes.”

According to Politico, Pelton, who is apparently being scapegoated for the fiasco, “seemed to dispute Brauchli’s version

of events.” He was quoted in an online commentary as insisting that newsroom figures, including Brauchli, had been engaged in discussions on the corporate-sponsored dinners. “This was well-developed with the newsroom,” he asserted.

There is no need to speculate about who is telling the truth in this case, because the *Post*’s effort, while spectacularly crude, is entirely in line with the standard operating procedure of the American media. Components of giant conglomerates themselves, in many cases, why should US newspapers, their publishers and editors hold themselves aloof from other corporate entities?

What may have prompted Weymouth and the *Post* at this particular moment to try and cash in on long-term relations, selling access to their reporters and to the publisher herself in this brazen fashion (columnist Kurtz noted that access to Weymouth “would be deemed valuable by those trying to influence The *Post*’s editorial policies and news coverage”), is the acute financial crisis facing the publication and the entire American newspaper industry.

The *Los Angeles Times* pointed out that “The Washington Post Co. reported a first-quarter net loss of \$19.5 million, compared with a net income of \$39.3 million in the same period last year. That mirrors an industry-wide swoon that analyst Alan D. Mutter labeled ‘the worst quarter in the modern history of American newspapers.’ Ad revenue plummeted more than 28 percent in the first three months of this year.”

Kurtz noted that various media companies charge large fees for conferences “with big-name executives and government officials, but in many cases the sessions are open for news coverage.” He pointed out that Atlantic Media was sponsoring the Aspen Ideas Festival, underwritten by Altria, Boeing, Booz Allen Hamilton, Ernst & Young, Mercedes-Benz, Philips, Shell and Thomson Reuters. Speakers include White House economic adviser Austan Goolsbee, U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice, Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer and Google CEO Eric Schmidt.

In March, the *Wall Street Journal* organized a two-day conference sponsored by Nasdaq, which included Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Outside journalists paid \$5,000 a piece to attend, and they also held a White House meeting with Obama economic adviser Lawrence Summers, “which was off the record at his request.”

In November, Politico explains, the *Journal*, “is charging a \$7,500 for its two-day CEO Council ... an elite gathering that will include the paper’s top editors and high-profile speakers like Tony Blair, Rupert Murdoch, and Education Secretary Arne Duncan. And for a few thousand dollars, The Economist can open the door to intimate off-the-record meet-and-greets with world leaders.”

The gap between these events and the *Post*’s proposed tête-à-têtes is very slim. They are all points on a continuum—the incestuous and corrupt relationship between corporate power, the government, the military and the intelligence apparatus and the media.

The salon proposal apparently caused an “uproar” in the *Post* newsroom. Some reporters may have genuine ethical concerns, others may simply be angered that such dirty operations have come to light. In any event, the intimate dinners at Weymouth’s house shed some light on the way in which the news is controlled

and vetted in the US. Television and newspaper reporters, by and large, function as conduits for the stories that powerful elements in business and the state want the public to see and read.

The American mass media ought to have no credibility whatsoever with the public. Its lies and omissions are themselves one of the major news stories of the past decade. In the midst of a global economic crisis and always fearful of popular unrest emerging, the broadcast and print media shift continuously to the right.

One has to put in this context the departure of a couple of critics of official policy from the ranks of newspaper journalism. The *New York Times* last year pushed out its longtime Supreme Court reporter, Linda Greenhouse. She accepted an early retirement from the newspaper at the end of the court’s session in the summer of 2008.

Greenhouse had been critical of Bush administration policies, referring in a speech to the fact that “our government had turned its energy and attention away from upholding the rule of law and toward creating law-free zones at Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, Haditha, and other places around the world.” Greenhouse came under strident criticism from the right wing; the *Times*, predictably, gave way.

In June the *Washington Post* fired columnist Dan Froomkin. The latter had been especially vocal on the question of torture, and became involved in a debate with ultra-right *Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer in May over the latter’s endorsement of waterboarding and other brutal measures.

On June 20, Katharine Weymouth delivered a commencement address in which she asserted, “Newspapers are a funny business—part business and part mission. And often, the two are in conflict. Our mission is to bring to the public news and information about the world around you. Our job is, as former Executive Editor Len Downie has said, to afflict the comfortable and to comfort the afflicted.” Nothing could be farther from the truth.



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