

Why did New York Times publisher A.G. Sulzberger meet with Trump?

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On July 29, following a week of escalating attacks on the press, President Donald Trump tweeted about a White House meeting held July 20 with *New York Times* publisher A.G. Sulzberger. Accompanying Sulzberger was Editorial Page Editor James Bennet. Also present was White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders. The two sides agreed that their meeting would be “off the record,” i.e., secret.

Trump tweeted: “Had a very good and interesting meeting at the White House with A.G. Sulzberger, Publisher of the New York Times. Spent much time talking about the vast amounts of Fake News being put out by the media & how that Fake News has morphed into phrase, ‘Enemy of the People.’ Sad!”

Trump’s tweet took Sulzberger and the *Times* by surprise. It is clear they did not want the existence of their meeting with Trump to be made known to the public. Within hours, Sulzberger responded with a statement refuting Trump’s account of what had occurred.

“My main purpose for accepting the meeting,” wrote Sulzberger, “was to raise concerns about the president’s deeply troubling anti-press rhetoric. I told the president directly that I thought that his language was not just divisive but increasingly dangerous.”

That same day, the *Times* published an article titled “New York Times Publisher and Trump Clash Over President’s Threats Against Journalism.” Other media outlets quickly intervened to back Sulzberger and endorse the *Times*’ version of the meeting. The *Washington Post* published an opinion piece titled “Memo to New York Times publisher: Don’t waste your time with Trump.”

On July 30, the *Post* followed up with a puff-piece on Sulzberger titled “‘He doesn’t like bullies’: The story of the 37-year-old who took over the New York Times and is taking on Trump.” Vox, one of the first publications to argue in favor of Internet censorship following the 2016 US presidential election, also weighed in with an article titled “Trump’s battle with the New York Times and A.G. Sulzberger, explained.”

After two days of media silence, the *Times* felt obliged to issue a further response. On August 2, the paper published an article titled “What Does ‘Off the Record’ Really Mean?” The author limited the article to a clinical explanation of the difference between “on” and “off” the record, while accusing

Trump of showing “disregard” for the latter.

The next day, the newspaper published an opinion piece titled “Trump Will Have Blood on His Hands.” Its author, Bret Stephens, a prominent critic of Trump within the Republican right, was brought onto the *Times* editorial staff last year. Stephens depicted Sulzberger as a crusader standing up to authoritarianism and repression in the name of journalists all over the world.

This chronology suggests that Trump’s revelation of the secret meeting caused concerns and raised questions within the staff and readership of the *Times*, which the newspaper has sought to contain. After all, the *Times* has spearheaded the anti-Russian witch-hunt, working in tandem with the Democratic Party and much of the corporate media, including the *Washington Post*. Both newspapers have denounced Trump as a stooge of Putin and even a traitor to the United States, their journalists and editorialists reaching a new level of hysteria following Trump’s summit with the Russian president in Helsinki. Trump, for his part, has repeatedly singled out the *Times* in his rants against the press.

This context naturally raises questions as to why Sulzberger would not only agree to such a meeting, but conceal it from the public—and, evidently, much of his newspaper’s own staff. Here are some questions that demand an answer:

What was discussed?

Sulzberger’s statement, an exercise in political evasion, gives no account of either the reason for or the nature of the meeting. To suggest that Sulzberger went to the White House to defend the democratic principle of press freedom is absurd on its face. The paper has played a critical role in concealing evidence of US war crimes from public view, persecuting whistleblowers such as Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, and leading the campaign against WikiLeaks and Julian Assange.

It serves as the main conduit of the military-intelligence agencies, most notoriously in the case of correspondent Judith Miller, whose fabrications about Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction,” fed to her by the CIA and the White House, played a central role in the Bush administration’s preparations to invade the country in 2003.

In 2007, WikiLeaks published the “Collateral Murder” video, documenting a US air strike that killed a dozen civilians in

Baghdad, including two Reuters journalists. The *Times* responded by trying to bury the report while touting the Pentagon line that WikiLeaks was a “national security risk.”

The preface to Sulzberger’s statement notes: “Mr. Trump’s tweet this morning ... has put the meeting on the record, so A.G. has decided to respond to the president’s characterization of their conversation, based on detailed notes A.G. and James [Bennet] took.”

Should not these “detailed notes” taken by Sulzberger and Bennet be officially “on the record” as well?

Why was the meeting concealed from the public?

In its July 29 article, the *Times* describes Sulzberger’s meeting with Trump as part of “a tradition of meetings between presidents and the paper’s publishers.” The article goes on to note that “tensions between *Times* publishers and presidents are nothing new.”

The *Washington Post* opinion piece published that same day elaborated on this point: “President Bill Clinton pressed Arthur Ochs Sulzberger Jr. [A.G. Sulzberger’s father] on critical editorials in the *Times*, and it’s well documented that President George W. Bush also met with Sulzberger to pressure the newspaper over its reporting on warrantless eavesdropping.” During his time as publisher of the paper, Sulzberger’s father referred to the relationship between the media and the president as “tough love.”

Bill Keller, the former executive director of the *Times*, spelled out more explicitly the content of this “love” between the *Times* and the state. In a 2006 speech at the University of Michigan, Keller made the case for the vital services provided to the capitalist state and US imperialism by the *Times* and the dangers of undermining its credibility.

“Legions of Internet journalists include at least a few who would feel no compunction about disclosing life-threatening information,” he said. “If a blogger hostile to the Bush administration managed to document sensitive secrets about the war on terror, would he stop to weigh the consequences of making them public? And once the information had rebounded through the blogosphere, how long would the major news organizations hesitate before picking it up?”

To underscore the point, he added, “Most of what the country knows about the secret activities of the government, it knows thanks to serious news organizations that still take their responsibilities seriously.”

In 2010, he defended the paper’s efforts to hide the US war crimes committed in Iraq with the statement: “We agree wholeheartedly that transparency is not an absolute good. Freedom of the press includes freedom not to publish, and that is a freedom we exercise with some regularity.”

What was James Bennet doing at the meeting?

One particularly concerning question pertains to the decision by Sulzberger to have James Bennet accompany him to the secret meeting with Trump. Why, for example, Bennet and not Executive Editor Dean Baquet?

family ~~Bennet~~ to ~~the~~ CIA ~~close~~ well Clinton and Obama administrations. His father, Douglas Bennet, served during Jimmy Carter’s presidency as administrator of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), a known CIA front implicated in regime-change operations all over the world. Bennet’s appointment was part of a broader rightward orientation by the *Times*, including its increasingly frenzied campaign to whip up public opinion against Russia.

Conversely, Baquet was sharply criticized by former *Times* correspondent Liz Spayd in January of last year for being “too timid” on publishing unverified material supposedly linking Putin to Trump.

What is behind the *New York Times*’ anger?

This new revelation sheds light on the incestuous relationship between the corporate media and the capitalist state. It is likely true that Sulzberger, Bennet and Trump did discuss the question of “fake news.” The advent of the Internet has led to the proliferation of sources of news and opinion outside of the traditional bourgeois media “gatekeepers,” who vet and censor the news in collaboration with the state.

Their rise in popularity amongst the population, particularly the rise of left-wing and anti-war websites, above all the *World Socialist Web Site*, has become a question of increasing concern for the so-called “newspaper of record.” This is the impetus—under conditions of stepped-up preparations for war against rival great powers and a resurgence of class struggle—behind the crackdown on oppositional media and the increasingly pervasive and overt regime of Internet censorship.

The *Times* speaks for a faction within the ruling class that has sharp foreign policy differences with Trump. However, both sides are united behind the fundamental class program of US global hegemony, the suppression of democratic rights, and ever more brutal austerity against the working class.

The *Times* editors fear that Trump’s rants about “fake news” may have the unintended result of directing broad masses of people away from the corporate media and toward alternative sources that oppose the policies of US imperialism. If the *Times* has expressed outrage at Trump’s tweet, it is only because it feels that Trump has exposed its complicity in the activities of the capitalist state.



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