

THE WAPO DIGS DEEPER

The WaPo now has its very own Howard Kurtz story reporting its very own pay-to-play scandal. But in my opinion, it raises as many questions as it answers.

For this story, Kurtz relied on interviews with Katharine Weymouth, the WaPo's publisher, and Marcus Brauchli, WaPo's Executive Editor. But he did not get an interview with Charles Pelton, the guy being blamed anonymously—by "Two Post executives" who may or may not be Weymouth and Brauchli—for the flier.

Weymouth, the chief executive of Washington Post Media, said in an interview.

[snip]

Moments earlier, Executive Editor Marcus Brauchli said in a separate interview ...

[snip]

Two Post executives familiar with the planning, who declined to be identified discussing internal planning, said the fliers appear to be the product of overzealous marketing executives. The fliers were overseen by Charles Pelton, a Post executive hired this year as a conference organizer. He was not immediately available for comment.

Now, if you're a newspaper trying to reassure readers that you're not selling access, then don't you think you owe it to readers to avoid any anonymous sourcing here? Instead, the appearance is that Weymouth and Brauchli are doing damage control by anonymously blaming Pelton for all of this, yet not allowing Kurtz to speak with Pelton directly to learn what his understanding of the conferences were.

On top of that, look at this amazingly

decontextualized quote Kurtz gives us from Weymouth.

Washington Post Publisher Katharine Weymouth today canceled plans for a series of policy dinners at her home after learning that marketing fliers offered lobbyists access to Obama administration officials, members of Congress and Post journalists in exchange for payments as high as \$250,000.

"Absolutely, I'm disappointed," Weymouth, the chief executive of Washington Post Media, said in an interview. "This should never have happened. The fliers got out and weren't vetted. They didn't represent at all what we were attempting to do. We're not going to do any dinners that would impugn the integrity of the newsroom."

See the problem? Kurtz doesn't tell us what Weymouth was responding to when she said she was disappointed! Is she disappointed that the fliers got circulated outside of intended clients? That they had to cancel the pay-to-play conferences? That their management system is so bad they sent these out unvetted? That they fired Dan Froomkin? That we haven't yet invaded Iran? Okay—the last two are a stretch, but Kurtz doesn't tell us precisely what Weymouth is disappointed about.

And the rest of that paragraph doesn't help things. Yes, Weymouth admits that the fliers shouldn't have gotten out without being vetted. But Weymouth's claim that the fliers didn't represent what they "were attempting to do," followed by the claim—made in an ambiguous tense—that "[they]'re not going to do any dinners that impugn the integrity of the newsroom," still leaves uncertain precisely what they had been intending to do.

It's only later in the story when—in a paragraph

sourced both to Weymouth and that pesky anonymous executive who sure looks like Weymouth again—we get more claims about what the plan was.

Weymouth knew of the plans to host small dinners at her home and to charge lobbying and trade organizations for participation. But, one of the executives said, she believed that there would be multiple sponsors, to minimize any appearance of charging for access, and that the newsroom would be in charge of the scope and content of any dinners in which Post reporters and editors participated.

Weymouth admits that they were going to have a pay to play in her home. But then someone who appears to be her, again, makes a comment that doesn't deny that "multiple sponsors" may be no more than the two in question, and only claims the newsroom had control in that same anonymous voice. In any case, how does the presence of multiple sponsors—whether it be just two or ten—avoid the appearance of pay-to-play, so long as the idea is to get in the room with the decision-makers?

Now, Howie Kurtz deserves to be mocked, mercifully, for his granting of two executives who may or may not be Weymouth and Brauchli anonymity to squirm out of their pay-to-play problem. But he does admit that even if the newsroom did control how reporters participated, there remains the yet undenied appearance that Weymouth was—and perhaps remains—happy to charge for access to herself.

Access to Weymouth herself, a granddaughter of longtime publisher Katharine Graham who took over as chief executive of Washington Post Media last year, would be deemed valuable by those trying to influence The Post's editorial policies and news coverage.

And we know—because Anita Dunn is quoted admitting that the WaPo approached HHS executives to attend the conference—that the WaPo was going to invite the policy makers to this conference as well.

So even in the most charitable interpretation, Weymouth was going to charge lobbyists \$25,000 to \$250,000 to meet with—the WaPo hoped—executives from HHS in Weymouth's living room.

Update: This is rich!! Howie Kurtz somehow couldn't find Pelton for his article. Maybe that's because this is what Pelton had to say when OmbudAndy found him.

The flier came out of the office Charles Pelton, who joined The Post recently to find ways to generate business through conferences and events. The Post, like many struggling newspapers, is desperately seeking new sources of revenue.

"There's no intention to influence or pedal," Pelton said this morning.

"There's no intention to have a Lincoln Bedroom situation," referring to charges that President Clinton used invitations to stay at the White House as a way of luring political backing.

Pelton said newsroom leaders, including Brauchli, had been involved in discussions about the salons and other events.

"This was well developed with the newsroom," he said. "What was not developed was the marketing message to potential sponsors."

And for some reason, Weymouth was instantly available to Howie Kurtz, but not to the paper's Ombud.

Weymouth is out of town.