

WAPO TRIES TO SILENCE ITS TWITS

Howard Kurtz' plaintive Tweet was the first hint that the authorities were cracking down:

Under new WP guidelines on tweeting, I will now hold forth only on the weather and dessert recipes.

Then came OmbudAndy's post on the new guidelines—which laid out some, but not all, of the new rules.

The new guidelines address the "perception problem" noted by Narisetti. A key section reads:

"When using these networks, nothing we do must call into question the impartiality of our news judgment. We never abandon the guidelines that govern the separation of news from opinion, the importance of fact and objectivity, the appropriate use of language and tone, and other hallmarks of our brand of journalism."

Another section reads: "What you do on social networks should be presumed to be publicly available to anyone, even if you have created a private account. It is possible to use privacy controls online to limit access to sensitive information. But such controls are only a deterrent, not an absolute insulator. Reality is simple: If you don't want something to be found online, don't put it there."

It continues: "Post journalists must refrain from writing, tweeting or posting anything – including photographs or video – that could be perceived as reflecting political racial, sexist, religious or other bias or favoritism

that could be used to tarnish our journalistic credibility.”

Read his whole post for some background on the kind of "perception problems" driving the guidelines.

Finally, PaidContent posted all the guidelines (which cover only personal Twitter and Facebook accounts, not professional ones—those guidelines will come later). More interesting than the "perception problem" guidelines OmbudAndy highlighted are the corporatist ones.

When using social networking tools for reporting or for our personal lives, we must remember that Washington Post journalists are always Washington Post journalists.

[snip]

Personal pages online are no place for the discussion of internal newsroom issues such as sourcing, reporting of stories, decisions to publish or not to publish, personnel matters and untoward personal or professional matters involving our colleagues. The same is true for opinions or information regarding any business activities of The Washington Post Company. Such pages and sites also should not be used to criticize competitors or those who take issue with our journalism or our journalists.

And, perhaps most amazing of all, where a newspaper implies that freedom of speech is a "privilege," not a right.

All Washington Post journalists relinquish some of the personal privileges of private citizens.

Or rather, freedom of speech exercised by a corporate media entity is inviolate. Freedom of

speech as exercised by a citizen is a mere privilege.

Now, frankly, the WaPo is no different than any number of corporations cracking down on the speech of their employees. Norv Turner feels the need to fine Antonio Cromartie for telling the world the San Diego Super Chargers keep bombing in the post season because the team feeds their players "nasty food" and, apparently, Katharine Weymouth feels that if one of her editors utters the following wisdom publicly...

We can incur all sorts of federal deficits for wars and what not, but we have to promise not to increase it by \$1 for healthcare reform? Sad.

... It will reflect badly on the "brand" of her newspaper.

Though I guess if the WaPo were to be associated with that kind of everyday common sense, it **would** dramatically alter people's perception of the rag.

Now, like I said, this makes WaPo employees just like the majority of citizens out there whose freedom of speech gets subjugated to their employers brand. The NFL must retain the appearance of fairness and the WaPo must aspire (however unsuccessfully) to the appearance of fairness.

But it's funny how much this is about appearance. Only electronic social networks matter to the WaPo, not brick and mortar social networks. Walter Pincus can boast that his chumminess with George Tenet helps his reporting,

Pincus professes to be unbothered – criticism from the left and right just "washes right off," he says. Nor is he impressed by another charge thrown at him – that his reporting is the result of being too cozy with important people in Washington. Pincus, who is 76 and

first started at the Post 43 years ago, is unapologetic about moving in the upper levels of the Washington establishment, serving on boards and socializing with high government officials like Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer and former CIA director George Tenet, many of them people he has known for years.

Weymouth herself can try to replicate the salons of her grandmother ... for a fee. And of all of these meatspace relationships have a tangible impact on the WaPo's reporting. All of **these** network ties very concretely contribute to WaPo's fatal-yet unacknowledged-bias, that of the Village.

Rather than admit and try to manage that bias, though, the WaPo would rather just curtail the free speech of its reporters.