Fear & Favor 10th Annual Report
Hidden interference in the newsroom
By Peter Hart

By now, the structural deficiencies in a corporate media system heavily dependent on commercial advertising and controlled by sprawling conglomerates should be obvious.

Dramatic reductions in advertising and subscription revenue in recent years mean news outlets are even less likely to push back against commercial intrusions in the functioning of the newsroom. Journalists trying to hold on to their jobs in a shrinking newsroom are less likely to speak up about interference from owners or other powerful interests. The examples of non-journalistic interference in the newsroom—which FAIR has been compiling for the past decade—are emblematic of a media system trying to find new ways to serve advertisers and marketers, in a desperate effort to increase revenue any way it can.

The conflicts this will surely create were starkly illustrated when Politico (7/3/09) revealed that Washington Post publisher Katharine Weymouth was to have a dozen off-the-record “salons” at her home, bringing together lobbyists, politicians and key Post reporters and editors. The get-togethers were to be “underwritten” by corporations with a financial stake in public policy—starting with a discussion of healthcare paid for by health giant Kaiser Permanente (Washington Post, 7/3/09). As the promotional literature put it, such underwriters would be able to “build crucial relationships with Washington Post news executives in a neutral and informal setting.”

The Post’s plans collapsed in the wake of negative publicity, but the paper’s willingness to compromise its independence was plain to see. Other media outlets have engineered similar gatherings; Newsweek magazine, for example, has partnered with Shell to present discussions on energy (Extra!, 9/09).

As FAIR notes every year, the anecdotes gathered here do not represent a full accounting of the problems in the media business. These are a sampling of incidents that have been reported in one venue or another.

The Boss’s Business

• Journalists working for owners with interests other than newsgathering are usually aware of their owner’s ties to commercial ventures or civic campaigns. A December 2, 2009, memo from publisher David Thompson to the staff of the Oklahoman newspaper offered the chance to volunteer to work on a campaign for a bond initiative called MAPS3 that the paper was supporting:
As we have said all along, OPUBCO [Oklahoma Publishing Company] employees should feel free to vote as they please next Tuesday, but if you are in favor of MAPS3 and would like an opportunity to earn paid Volunteer Leave to support this initiative, this is a worthy opportunity for you!

- Sometimes the owner’s interests directly affect what’s printed in the paper. The New York Times reported (8/31/09) that Long Island paper Newsday, which was bought by Cablevision in 2008, decided it would no longer accept advertising from Verizon—whose FiOS television service is a Cablevision competitor. As the Times noted, this was not the first time there were questions about the way Cablevision was running Newsday:

  In January, the top three editors at Newsday did not report for work for a few days amid reports that they had been fired or had resigned in a dispute with Cablevision over the paper’s coverage of the New York Knicks basketball team, which is also owned by the company. The editors returned to duty, and neither they nor the company offered a full explanation of what had happened.

- A newspaper that owns a cable company and a local sports franchise is certainly a conflicted source of news. But what happens when the local paper is owned by a powerful church? The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints owns the Utah-based Deseret News, and the conflict inherent in that connection was obvious when the Mormon church’s donations to an anti-gay marriage ballot initiative in California received national media scrutiny.

  As Columbia Journalism Review reported (May–June/09), “the Deseret News gave short shrift to the allegations, only quoting sources who defended the Church, whereas the competing Salt Lake Tribune, and other publications, published several articles on the topic that let both sides express their positions.” The editorial independence of the News has come under scrutiny in the last few years, as editor-in-chief Joe Cannon has sought to bring the paper in line with the church’s mission—an effort to make it “more Mormon.” CJR noted that these efforts included reassigning two editors, which sparked a newsroom protest and a byline strike on February 25.

- An August 1 New York Times report revealed an example of corporate interference involving two of cable television’s most prominent foes. Fox News Channel star Bill O’Reilly and MSNBC’s Keith Olbermann have spent several years trading criticism and taunts. At MSNBC, executives at parent company General Electric were specifically concerned about O’Reilly’s criticism of GE’s business; according to the Times, executives from the rival companies met in May of 2009 to hash out some sort of “ceasefire” agreement.

  As the Times reported, MSNBC president Phil Griffin “told producers that he wanted the channel’s other programs to follow Mr. Olbermann’s lead and restrain from criticizing Fox directly, according to two employees.” While Olbermann told the paper that he was “party to no deal,” other MSNBC sources indicated otherwise. Salon’s Glenn Greenwald (8/3/09) reported that one regular MSNBC guest “was recently told by a segment producer that explicit mentions of Fox News were prohibited,” and that “there has been talk among MSNBC employees ever since the GE edict was issued about ways to protest it and to stand up for their journalistic freedom.”

  The “truce” seemed to vanish after the Times story was printed. But Olbermann’s bosses at GE
offered little in the way of explanation, which raised obvious concerns about the independence of journalists working for the company. If a star at MSNBC can be convinced to rein in the kind of commentary that made his show successful, would journalists further down the corporate food chain be able to resist such pressure?

• Sometimes it’s a boss’s personal relationship that needs to be protected. When Newsweek posted a Web interview with MSNBC host Joe Scarborough (6/5/09), it mentioned up top that Scarborough had been a defense attorney for an anti-abortion murderer (Gawker, 6/9/09). With the murder of abortion provider George Tiller in the news, the mention made journalistic sense.

That’s when Newsweek editor Jon Meacham intervened. Saying that he was contacted by “a member of Scarborough’s team” (Gawker, 6/9/09), Meacham had the discomfitting detail removed from the top of the story. When the subject is a friend who regularly invites you on his TV program, the journalistic rules can be bent.

• Other times bosses themselves make news. On December 8, Bloomberg reported that a Chicago underwriting company called Mesirow had mishandled a municipal bond, potentially costing the city millions of dollars. As Michael Miner noted in the Chicago Reader (12/11/09), Mesirow’s CEO is Jim Tyree, who also happens to lead the group of investors that owns the Chicago Sun-Times media company.

So how did that paper play the news about the boss’s botched bond deal? As Miner noted, the over-1,800-word Bloomberg piece was cut to 259 in the Sun-Times, with enough space reserved for Tyree to respond. Did Tyree give the paper any pointers on how to cover his business deals? “Not on this nor on anything else,” he said. But how much guidance does a journalist or editor interested in keeping a job really need?

In Advertisers We Trust

• Reminders that advertisers have undue influence on the news business are constant, and that message can be sent any number of ways. In December, a memo from Dallas Morning News editor Bob Mong and senior vice-president of sales Cyndy Carr (Dallas Observer blog, 12/3/09) announced a change in policy to employees of the A.H. Belo Corporation: Some editors would henceforth report directly to the company’s sales managers. The sales team will “be working closely with news leadership in product and content development.” The memo caused “uneasiness” among some news staffers, according to Mong, but others were, well, at ease—one editor was “excited about the idea of working with a business partner on an arts and entertainment segment.” The memo itself called the rearrangement “one of several key strategies we have implemented this year to better serve our advertising clients.”

• These blurry lines between advertising and news seem to be getting ever blurrier. In the past year, NBC Universal sought to make special advertising packages tied to specific “causes.” One example—Campbell’s Soup would sponsor health segments on the Today show (Wall Street Journal, 10/19/09).

• When Glenn Greenwald (Salon, 8/1/09) exposed that former Newsweek reporter Richard Wolffe was making appearances on MSNBC without disclosing his new job at a PR outfit, Wolffe was unusually direct about his former profession:

“The idea that journalists are somehow not engaged in corporate activities is not really
in touch with what’s going on. Every conversation with journalists is about business models and advertisers,” he said, recalling that, on the day after the 2008 election, Newsweek sent him to Detroit to deliver a speech to advertisers. “You tell me where the line is between business and journalism,” he said.

• That attitude is commonplace in news media these days. The panelists on MSNBC’s Morning Joe always rather conspicuously consumed Starbucks drinks on the air, and at some point decided to make that arrangement official—and profitable. As New York Times reporter Brian Stelter (6/1/09) put it, host Joe Scarborough “sips Frappuccinos on camera so often that some viewers have wondered whether it is a form of product placement, paid for by the coffee company. Starting Monday, it will be.” The $10 million deal included “Starbucks graphics and mentions during each hour” of the show.

Would the arrangement cause any sort of conflict? MSNBC president Phil Griffins assured the Times that the show “would continue to cover Starbucks as a news item if warranted. ‘They understand that we have standards.’” One such “standard” involved interviewing the CEO of the company soon after the deal was reached (AP, 6/1/09).

• On April 9, the Los Angeles Times ran a front-page advertisement for the NBC drama Southland that was made to look like a news article; careful readers saw an NBC logo and the small label “Adverti-ment.” Worse, it was revealed (New York Times, 4/10/09) that the concept for the ad came not from NBC but from the paper’s advertising department. NBC official Adam Stotsky sounded ecstatic: “What was great about this ad unit is it gave us a quote-unquote ‘editorial voice.’” L.A. Times readers left queasy about the arrangement hardly had time to recover; three days later, the New York Times (4/11/09) reported that the L.A. paper’s entertainment section was “accompanied by a four-page advertisement for the movie The Soloist that is laid out like a news section.” The “ad” included an interview with a columnist from the paper, whose work inspired the film. Like the front-page ad, the concept was developed by the paper. For what it’s worth, the advertising arrangements seem to have offended many of the journalists at the L.A. Times; the Soloist ad ran over the objections of the paper’s editor, and 100 reporters wrote a letter of protest (New York Times, 4/26/09).

• Making news decisions with an eye toward the needs of advertisers was the subject of a Wall Street Journal report (11/2/09) about actions at the Detroit Free Press. Upon learning that insurance company Humana Inc. was interested in advertising alongside any reporting about a Medicare open enrollment period, the paper decided to do a special section on the topic, giving Humana the kind of marketing opportunity it apparently craved. That the news staff got wind of Humana’s interest was no accident; as the Journal reported, the Free Press has a “Client Solutions Group” that was established “in part to act as a liaison between the
business and news staffs."

The Journal also noted that the Free Press had run consecutive education features in its Sunday editions in late September—stories that appeared above ads for the retail giant Target, touting the company’s education initiatives. That arrangement seemed to be similar to the Humana deal, though the precise nature of the deal remained somewhat murky. Not so murky, on the other hand, was a comment from Detroit Free Press editor and publisher Paul Anger: “One of the things I think newsrooms have to realize...is we’re here to cover the news in an unvarnished way, but we’re also here to facilitate commerce.”

• How far such facilitation might go remains a concern. Las Vegas TV station KVBC filed an FCC complaint against three of its rivals (KVVU, KLAS and KTNV) “charging that the stations sold airtime to an advertiser inside their newscasts and used reporters to conduct interviews presented as objective news stories without disclosing that the segments were purchased” (Las Vegas Review-Journal, 10/9/09). The complaint alleges that the stations conducted interviews that were essentially paid for—dressing up advertisements as news. The station seemingly learned of this when advertising staffers were told that they needed to “guarantee the news coverage” the same way its rivals were apparently doing.

• An example of the blending of TV advertising and news was reported in the Tulsa World (4/5/09), thanks to a deal that Oklahoma television company Griffin Communications made with the state government insurance provider Insure Oklahoma. The $3 million deal resulted in promotional spots airing within the newscasts on two Griffin-owned stations that looked exactly like news segments; they even hired a former newscaster from the station to appear in the spots. There is disclosure—of a sort, according to the World: “After the stories, the news anchor typically reads a disclosure statement informing viewers that the segment is sponsored by the station’s parent company, Griffin Communications, and the Oklahoma Health Care Authority.” Griffin CEO David Griffin told the paper, “We don’t sell the news. We never have, and we never will....The spots that run match up to our commitment to Insure Oklahoma.”

• Of course, the clearest lesson a reporter might learn about not offending an important advertiser is one that ends in that reporter being out of a job. Colorado journalist Bob Berwyn was fired from the Summit Daily News days after writing a column critical of local ski resorts (CBS4Denver.com, 12/9/09). The column did not sit well with Vail Resorts CEO Rob Katz, who apparently warned that it might reconsider its advertising relationship with the paper.

• As Hartford Courant consumer columnist George Gombossy alleged that he was fired from his paper after 40 years of experience for writing critically about the Sleepy’s mattress company. Officials at the paper deny the allegation, but a New York Times report (8/18/09) recalled some troubling backstory: Gombossy says he’d been previously ordered to meet with a company he had criticized—a company that happened to be an advertiser. The Courant acknowledged that it was standard policy to alert major advertisers in advance of critical reporting.

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