

Nov 04, 2016 by [Mark Dillen](#)

A Tale of Two Posts ^[1]

Today, a tale about what journalism has become, with implications for all those concerned with the weakening firewall between “news” and “message.”

It's a tale of two Posts — Washington and Huffington.

A revolution is underway in the news media, one neatly illustrated by how these two competitive news gathering organizations — the Washington Post and Huffington Post — have themselves made news in recent days. And, I'll warn you, if you don't already know, it's the Washington Post that comes out looking bad.

The first instance came last week at President Obama's first full-scale daytime press conference. Normally, the senior wire service reporter asks the first question, and a major U.S. TV network asks the second. However, this time, after answering a question from AP's Jennifer Loven, Obama turned to Huffington Post reporter Nico Pitney and called on him. “Since we're on Iran,” the President began, “I know Nico Pitney is here from Huffington Post...Nico, I know that you, and all across the Internet, we've been seeing a lot of reports coming directly out of Iran. I know that there may actually be questions from people in Iran who are communicating through the Internet. Do you have a question?”

Yes, I did, answers Pitney. I want to use this opportunity to ask you a question directly from an Iranian, he adds.

Pitney then proceeded to ask a question on this topic and the President gave a fairly unsatisfying answer. But the media hubbub that ensued challenged some long held assumptions. First, did the President, through his Press Office, suggest the topic that the questioner might ask about? If so, didn't this violate journalistic ethics?

A remarkable and undignified televised exchange finally took place between the Washington Post's Dana Milbank and Pitney and served to underline the competition between the struggling “old” media and the upstart “new” media. While there was a valid complaint — that media reps should avoid even the appearance of collusion with the politicians they cover — at heart this was a sign of the waning influence of the Washington Post and the rising influence of the Huffington Post.

But that was nothing compared to what the Washington Post did *this week*. Katherine Weymouth, the Washington Post's new publisher, had the idea that her Post should organize exclusive “salons” where lobbyists, for a hefty price, could saddle up to Post reporters, government officials and other “select minds.” The new medium that broke this story, Politico, now reports that Weymouth has retired this idea, after an “uproar” in the newsroom that occasioned official statements from WP editors that the nature of the proposed events “precluded” participation by Post journalists.

This should give pause to all those who analyze the media and their responsibilities.

For decades, many major news media — or media that were once major — have traded off their prestige as news gathering organizations to conduct lucrative sidelines, such as organizing conferences attended by politicians and policy makers. The Economist is a good example. A special division of their organization does nothing but organize conferences that participants pay thousands of dollars to attend. Occasionally some news is made which The Economist is well positioned to report first. A little murky, perhaps.

Publishers and owners of major media also entertain society's movers and shakers. At such soirees, discussion is understood to be off the record, and usually there are professional boundaries observed.

But when the two ideas are combined to yield a "pay for access" situation, the proper separation of journalism and officialdom is removed, and we are all the worse off for it. This is bad news for all of us who depend on media trying to be objective.

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