

THE NEW(S) ACCESS BROKERS: SO MUCH FOR THE "IMPARTIAL CENTER"

When Dan Froomkin described on Tuesday why the oldtimers at the WaPo had him fired, he spoke a lot about the Holy Grail of the impartial center. Granted, Froomkin described the now-departed Len Downie as that cult's High Priest. Nevertheless, it sounds like that "impartial center" can be bought for \$25,000 to \$250,000 a shot.

For \$25,000 to \$250,000, The Washington Post is offering lobbyists and association executives off-the-record, nonconfrontational access to "those powerful few" – Obama administration officials, members of Congress, and the paper's own reporters and editors.

The astonishing offer is detailed in a flier circulated Wednesday to a health care lobbyist, who provided it to a reporter because the lobbyist said he feels it's a conflict for the paper to charge for access to, as the flier says, its "health care reporting and editorial staff."

The offer – which essentially turns a news organization into a facilitator for private lobbyist-official encounters – is a new sign of the lengths to which news organizations will go to find revenue at a time when most newspapers are struggling for survival.

Now, Mike Allen skewers his former employer, the WaPo, pretty seriously (and deservedly) for this.

"Washington Post Salons are extensions

of The Washington Post brand of journalistic inquiry into the issues, a unique opportunity for stakeholders to hear and be heard," the flier says. "At the core is a critical topic of our day. Dinner and a volley of ideas unfold in an evening of intelligent, news-driven and off-the-record conversation. ... By bringing together those powerful few in business and policy-making who are forwarding, legislating and reporting on the issues, Washington Post Salons give life to the debate. Be at this nexus of business and policy with your underwriting of Washington Post Salons."

But I want to know about the other side of the equation. Which members of Congress and the Administration have agreed to participate? Did they know of the payoffs the lobbyists will make to host the events? And did the politicians expect anything in return? Or will they just be able to order up some WaPo scolding every time citizens demand real health care reform of their elected representatives? In other words, what is clear from this is that the WaPo doesn't give a shit about neutrality, they care only about an illusion of "objectivity." But what remains unclear is the rest of the equation—just how the WaPo managed to insert itself as the facilitator between lobbyists and our government—and the gatekeeper chasing citizens away at the same time.

Update: WaPo's full CYA:

A flyer was distributed this week offering an "underwriting opportunity" for a dinner on health-care reform, in which the news department had been asked to participate.

The language in the flyer and the description of the event preclude our participation.

We will not participate in events where

promises are made that in exchange for money The Post will offer access to newsroom personnel or will refrain from confrontational questioning. Our independence from advertisers or sponsors is inviolable.

There is a long tradition of news organizations hosting conferences and events, and we believe The Post, including the newsroom, can do these things in ways that are consistent with our values.