


HOWIE KURTZ'S LATEST STORY: WEYMOUTH DEFENDS PAY2PLAY SCHEME

 Howie Kurtz worked all day yesterday trying to come up with a narrative that would make the WaPo's Pay2Play scheme look less damning. His latest effort is notable for several reasons:

- He killed the anonymous quotations from Weymouth and Brauchli
- With those anonymous quotes, he also killed any description of what the Pay2Play dinners were supposed to be
- He let Weymouth spend 356 words claiming "everyone does it"
- He gave a list of the planned attendees

Nevertheless, the bottom line of the story is that Katharine Weymouth still appears to defend the concept of Pay2Play in her living room.

Killing the anonymous quotations from Weymouth and Brauchli

Perhaps Howie killed the anonymous quotes because, in an article trying to defend the WaPo's "journalistic integrity" and "integrity of the newsroom" it just looked bad to grant the WaPo's Publisher and Executive Editor anonymity to blame another employee and make vague claims about what the real intent here was. Perhaps Howie killed those quotes because I was already harping on him for them. But as I pointed out yesterday, Howie granted anonymity to WaPo

executives who were almost certainly WaPo publisher Weymouth and WaPo Executive Editor Brauchli so they could blame this all on Charles Pelton and make claims about what the Pay2Play Dinners were supposed to be.

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.

[snip]

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. [my emphasis]

Those anonymous quotations are now gone. Howie replaced the first with on the record quotes directly from Pelton, falling on his sword for not vetting the fliers (but not, it should be noted, for the plan itself).

The fliers were approved by a top Post marketing executive, Charles Pelton, who said it was "a big mistake" on his part and that he had done so "without vetting it with the newsroom."

[snip]

"We should never imply that there's a possible link between coming [to dinners] and access, either to the leaders or the policymakers or the

journalists," he said, conceding that he had been "sloppy . . . in my enthusiasm to get the salons up and running without properly thinking through the implications of what was written."

Killing the description of what the dinners were supposed to be

But Howie doesn't really replace the executive-who-appears-to-be-Weymouth's claims about what the Pay2Play dinners were supposed to be. There's the description of what was on the fliers, of course. Mostly, though, he's left with Weymouth's now on-the-record excuses for why Pay2Play isn't such a bad thing.

But precisely what would be acceptable remains unclear. Asked whether the forums she envisions might still be viewed as buying access to Post journalists, Weymouth said, "I suppose you could spin it that way, but that is not the way it would have been done." She said the situation would be comparable to a company buying an ad in the newspaper while knowing that it "might hate the content" on that page.

What? Weymouth was going to serve "content"—rubber chicken or something—that attendees would hate? She was going to interrupt Kaiser's attendees just as they started attacking a public option? Make sure they weren't allowed to speak to the White House healthcare czar? How do you control the content of a dinner party?

Ultimately—and this is the lede that gets buried in this story—the WaPo's publisher still maintains that a Pay2Play dinner giving lobbyists access to policy makers (and—though the Executive Editor won't let this happen now—reporters) is no big deal.

Arguing "everybody does it"

Rather than a real recognition of the problem here, the WaPo's publisher basically argues—and Howie spends 356 words arguing for her—that "everybody does it."

But she said other news organizations sponsor similar conferences and that **she remains comfortable with the basic idea of lobbyists or corporations underwriting dinners with officials and journalists as long as those paying the fees have no control over the content.**

[snip]

A number of media companies charge substantial fees for conferences with big-name executives and government officials, but in many cases the sessions are open for news coverage.

This week, for instance, Atlantic Media is sponsoring the Aspen Ideas Festival, underwritten by Altria, Boeing, Booz Allen Hamilton, Ernst & Young, Mercedes-Benz, Philips, Shell and Thomson Reuters. Speakers include White House economic adviser Austan Goolsbee, U.N. Ambassador Susan Rice, Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer and Google CEO Eric Schmidt, along with journalists for Atlantic and other media outlets.

Atlantic Editor James Bennet said the festival, co-sponsored by the Aspen Institute, "is open to the press . . . and we're videotaping it. We have editorial control over it. We decide what the panels are and who's on them. There are absolutely no constraints put on it at all."

In March, the Wall Street Journal brought together global finance leaders — including Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner and Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd — for a two-day conference sponsored by Nasdaq and hosted by Robert

Thomson, the Journal's top editor, and other editors and reporters. Outside journalists were invited to the session, which was on the record and webcast by the Journal. Participants, who paid several thousand dollars to attend, also had a White House meeting with economic adviser Lawrence Summers, which was off the record at his request.

The Journal also holds conferences with its All Things Digital unit. A session in May, described as offering "unmatched access to the technology industry's elite," was sponsored by Hewlett-Packard and Qualcomm, among others, and featured the CEOs of Microsoft, Yahoo, NBC Universal, AT&T and Twitter, as well as Weymouth.

The New Yorker hosts an annual festival in Manhattan featuring its editors and writers along with other journalists, authors and entertainers. The gathering planned for October is sponsored by American Airlines, Delta, Westin Hotels and Banana Republic. [my emphasis]

Apparently, the woman now running the WaPo sees no difference between an event in her living room targeted to the biggest policy fight of the year, and more general exchanges of ideas. Apparently, she also thinks that if ideologically driven papers like the WSJ hold such events, so can she—even while invoking journalistic integrity with her next breath. Apparently she thinks that because Larry Summers—a chief target of those decrying beltway influence peddling—demands an off-the-record chat, it's okay for her to offer it up as well.

Apparently, the WaPo's publisher thinks that an "everyone does it" defense makes her own efforts to peddle influence okay.

Listing the planned attendees

And it's clear—given the list of key players

Howie gives us—that that was the plan. The key players, Howie reveals, were supposed to be White House health care reform czar Nancy-Ann DeParle, Blue Dog Jim Cooper, and Kaiser Permanente, all big players in the upcoming healthcare fight.

For her part, DeParle is denying she had received the invitation (though, particularly given her fondness for the revolving door, this could be an attempt to parse a distinction between receiving an invite and agreeing to attend).

But a White House spokeswoman said no senior administration officials had agreed to attend, and an aide to DeParle said she had received no such invitation.

Blue Dog headache Jim Cooper says—through an aide—that he would not attend a "radioactive" event like this.

John Spragens, a spokesman for Cooper, said that once the Tennessee Democrat learned the details of the dinner, he would not have attended "a radioactive event. . . . You don't want to be put in a position as a congressman where someone's buying access to you."

And while both those Democratic fans of influence peddling appear to deny they were attending a Pay2Play dinner, Kaiser Permanente makes a more narrow distinction between "buying influence" and "a seat at the table."

Sybil Wartenberg, a spokeswoman for California-based Kaiser Permanente, said the company had not made a final decision to finance the dinner – no contract had been signed – and was not attempting to buy influence. "Our organization is not as well-known on the East Coast," she said. "We're keenly interested in reform and want to be at

the table for discussions."

I assume, however, that Kaiser was well aware of just how exclusive Katharine Weymouth's table was set to be.

Which, if you read between the lines of Howie's latest effort to tell this story, is what we've got. Though Weymouth and Pelton disavow **the flier** they sent out (Brauchli disavows the plan itself), they appear to stand by the principle of getting the key players on a policy fight together in the publisher's living room. For a price.