The Armstrong effect

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If we’re done being shocked, shocked, that commentator Armstrong Williams took $240,000 from the Bush administration to promote No Child Left Behind, maybe we’ll have the stomach to notice that there are some other sinners in Cassablanca. The Williams case is egregious because his payola was in cash, rather than in-kind, and because the six-figure want ads made more like a sweetheart deal between conservatives than a payday he’d count in the open market. But the transaction between power and media in the Williams affair is unsimilarly similar to the uncontroversial kickbacks, compromises and boundary-blurring that occur daily in Washington, Hollywood and parts between.

Of course, smart politicians don’t pay cash to the journalists and pundits they cultivate. The Washington currency is access—a leak, an exclusive, a chummy nickname used at a televised press conference. Scoops get reporters’ bylines onto the front page and their faces onto the tube; get enough exposure and you’ve got a decent shot at a raise, a promotion or a book contract.

Joe Scarborough may exorcise Armstrong Williams on his show, but when Scarborough shows up on the dais behind President Bush at a Florida campaign rally, it can’t hurt his status with his Bush-contributing bosses at GE when contract renegotiation time comes around.

The speakers’ circuit is where Washington talking heads come closest to Armstrong Williams’ conflict of interest. Some pundits and journalists make $25,000 or more per appearance; just look at the catalogs of their speakers bureaus. Practically every trade association in Washington tries to get high-profile commentators to come to their conventions and leadership retreats.

Maybe playing golf in Hawaii, and scoring enough extra dough to get a Lexus this time instead of another Honda, have no impact at all on what you think about the safety of prescription drugs imported from Canada, or the wisdom of rules preventing newspapers from owning television stations in the same market. Yeah, and maybe men are angels.

Bags of swag

Hollywood excels at this kind of thing. Studios know that many in the entertainment press don’t have the budgets or the scruples to turn down all-expenses-paid junkets to Disney World, to New York or to the set in New Zealand. A bag of swag, or a signed photo of the writer in a bear-hug with a smiling superstar, isn’t a guarantee against a critic’s pan, but it can’t hurt.

I’ve heard more than a few first-hand accounts of a classic mogul move in the midst of a tough interview: “You’re really good,” says the executive to the reporter. “You’re too smart to be working for the trades, the New York Times, whatever.” Don’t you have a screenplay in you?” And if not a screenplay, then what’s spotted is executive potential, or a feature story they’ve written that can be optioned, or maybe a gig as a celebrity ghostwriter or corporate speechwriter. Some journalists laugh out loud. Others become ex-journalists and laugh all the way to the bank.

News you can’t use

By and large, neither politicians nor entertainment executives regard the press as a check on the abuse of power, or as the representatives of the public. They regard journalists as nuisances—useful idiots.

The White House is not shy about this; the president and his people have patiently explained that they view reporters as a special interest group, one constituency among many, and the administration has notoriously issued deceptive news video press releases voiced by ersatz reporters, in the hope that local stations will confuse them with news.

Some reporters take great pains not to cross lines, and to disclose conflicts of interest when they’re unavoidable. Many publications and broadcasters have codes of conduct designed to prevent even the appearance of a conflict. Professional associations in journalism and public relations, and the schools that train future practitioners, post guidelines and teach standards. And, of course, there are laws against payola and domestic propaganda.

But consider the rise of the political pundit industry, driven by the insatiability of 24-hour cable news; the advent of faux think tanks funded by right-wing billionaires; the popularity of the glossy magazines and strip-syndication shows that exist to flatter; the transformation of news from public interest to profit center; the conglomerates housing news and entertainment under the same roof. It’s no wonder journalism’s boundaries have blurred.

These days, anyone can be a pundit or celebrity correspondent; all you have to do is put up a shingle, and find someone willing to publish or air what you have to say. And in the Internet era, everyone can be a publisher. Maybe no other outrage will rise to the level of a $240,000 contract, but that doesn’t diminish the risks of continuing to do business as usual. More transparency would help. I host a weekday show on Air America Radio, and I was Walter Mondale’s chief speechwriter, that makes me a Democrat, even a liberal, which to some means traitor or Satanist. I also worked for Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg. Does that make me incapable of a thoughtful comment about Washington or Hollywood? You be the judge.

The ideal isn’t ridding the media of people with experience, perspective or even axes to grind. The ideal is alerting consumers to what they’re getting.

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