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Post Publisher Acknowledges Mistakes

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Weymouth Says Rushed Planning Led to Inaccurate Flier on Policy Dinners

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Washington Post publisher Katharine Weymouth said yesterday that a hasty time frame, haphazard planning and miscommunication led to the release of a promotional flier that inaccurately described the newspaper's plans for a series of sponsored "salons" with influential insiders.

"We decided to throw this particular event very recently," Weymouth said in an interview. "We said, 'Let's not wait. Let's pick a date and let's go for it.' When you rush like that, you make mistakes."

Weymouth said she takes responsibility for the controversy, and she took the rare step of writing a [letter](#) to readers, which appears today on the Op-Ed page [A19]. "As publisher it is my job to ensure that we adhere to standards that are consistent with our integrity as a news organization," Weymouth writes. "Last week, I let you, and the organization, down."

The plan to host a series of off-the-record, sponsored dinners at Weymouth's home in the District, and invite Obama administration officials, lawmakers, lobbyists, business leaders, and Post editors and reporters, exploded in controversy when a promotional flier described an effort to sell sponsorships of \$25,000 for each dinner or as much as \$250,000 for a series of 11 dinners. The flier promised exclusive access to the newsmakers and journalists.

The first of the dinners, billed as salons, was to be held July 21 and focus on health-care policy. Weymouth canceled the dinner after Politico.com disclosed the details of what was being offered to potential sponsors in the flier.

Critics have accused The Post of abusing its journalistic integrity and of attempting to profit from selling access to powerful and influential people.

Weymouth, the granddaughter of legendary publisher Katharine Graham and niece of The Washington Post Company's chief executive, Donald Graham, has said repeatedly that the plan was inaccurately portrayed in the promotional flier and that the flier was sent out, without approval, by Charles Pelton, a marketing employee hired two months ago. Weymouth said Pelton is still employed by the paper; he could not be reached to comment yesterday.

In interviews yesterday, Weymouth and Post Executive Editor Marcus Brauchli both said the long-standing plan for the dinners was to have multiple sponsors so that a single sponsor would not be perceived as controlling or influencing the discussion.

They described a lengthy and detailed series of planning meetings involving the newspaper's executives and top newsroom representatives that were intended to create a new business involving dinners, seminars and conferences. Pelton, a former newspaper journalist who had started his own meeting business, was hired to oversee this new business.

Pelton made a general presentation about the conferences and salons at a senior managers' meeting that included newsroom editors on June 24, making no mention of attracting an exclusive sponsor or of promising special access, Weymouth and Brauchli said. Such a disclosure would have been a red flag, they said, and would have been unacceptable to the newspaper's journalists. "We were clear on the ground rules," Weymouth said.

However, as Weymouth described it, the first salon was a somewhat hastily planned affair. Pelton suggested July 21 as the first date. After checking her schedule, Weymouth agreed. Invitations were sent using her business e-mail address early last week, although Weymouth said she was out of town and never saw the language.

"We viewed it as a test," she said. "We said, 'Let's see if we can get it off the ground.' In hindsight, that was a mistake. We should have been much more buttoned down. We should have waited."

Invitations to the dinner were sent to about 30 people, she said. The flier appeared separately; Weymouth said she did not know when it had been sent out. "I know I didn't see it, and to the best of my knowledge no one in the newsroom had seen it. If we had, we would have spiked it," she said.

Brauchli has said he had planned to attend the dinners but was unaware that a flier was describing them as a "collegial" and non-confrontational opportunity for a paying sponsor to gain exclusive access to Post journalists. If he had known, he said,

he would have refused to participate and would have forbidden Post reporters and editors from attending.

Brauchli, like Weymouth, said the dinner might have been acceptable if multiple sponsors had been found for the series, whose topics would change from week to week. "We don't do single sponsorship of content in the newspaper," he said. "This is very analogous. Whether in print or at a conference, when the news department is involved, we decide the topic, and we decide how to create the content."

He added: "When you find yourself up to your knees in conditions and parameters, you're in a swamp and you should get out. I made a mistake not doing that earlier."

Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism, said attracting multiple sponsors misses the point of the controversy.

"It's true that the idea of having many advertisers limits the ability of any single advertiser to influence your coverage," he said. "The problem here goes beyond that. Newspapers owe their first allegiance to the public. Their first obligation is to make information public and to inspire public debate and discussion. . . . In this case, The Washington Post would be arranging events that only insiders have access to and profiting from those events. It's fundamentally antithetical to what news organizations do. It's quite different from holding a conference and inviting the public to attend."

Said Brauchli: "I think there is a legitimate debate right now about whether we should be doing this at all. We thought there was a way to do so consistent with our journalistic values, but in light of this experience, it is clear that this was a mistake."

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