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‘Washington Post’ May Find Conflicts in Amazon Coverage

(transcript)

MELISSA BLOCK, HOST:

The sale of The Washington Post to Amazon billionaire Jeff Bezos could bring up conflict between the owner's interests and the paper's editorial independence. I talked about some of those issues with longtime media executive and consultant Merrill Brown. Among his jobs, he was a reporter and then corporate executive for The Washington Post. Later, he was founding editor-in-chief of msnbc.com. I asked Brown what he sees as potential conflicts of interest with Bezos at the helm of The Post.

MERRILL BROWN: The reach of Amazon is so vast. It is involved in so many different issues ranging from foreign trade to taxes to Internet security to NSA kind of issues in terms of data gathering. The question will become how alert they are to where those conflicts exist and how to call them out as efficiently as possible.

BLOCK: Well, when you say call them out, what would that involve? I mean, are we talking about the appearance of a conflict of interest and what the newspaper owes its readers in terms of transparency and disclaimers?

BROWN: We're talking about both the public face of it and also, if I'm a reporter covering a story and Amazon has been lobbying on that story, and its principal owner and CEO is my boss, I ought to know that so as to not to step into anything that's inappropriate.

BLOCK: What would that mean? Where might that lead, that knowledge?

BROWN: Well, that knowledge ranges from what I tell my editors about what I've uncovered, what I tell my editors about Amazon's role in it, what level of disclosure is required internally and externally. I mean, Amazon, in theory - like big companies like it - lobbies on everything. And just everybody needs to know what the facts are about the employer and the reporter. Generally, these things can work out fine, but there's no guarantee unless the facts are known.

BLOCK: Well, Jeff Bezos did say in an open letter to The Washington Post staff: The values of The Post do not need changing. We will continue to follow the truth wherever it leads. But it does raise questions about how a newsroom can inoculate itself from the business interests of an owner, especially one as powerful and as widespread as Jeff Bezos is.

BROWN: And if I can use an anecdote from my own career, we went out of our way - in the early days of MSNBC - to be clear to everybody involved that we were going to be covering Microsoft. We had to make clear to them what we were doing. And they just had to acknowledge that that coverage was going on, and they were going to have to get comfortable with that. And there were rocky moments along the way there, but ultimately, they understood it. But they didn't understand it right off the bat and had no idea what the implications of that kind of circumstance is.

That's going to happen here as Jeff, and whoever he installs, gets comfortable with the idea that Amazon and things material to it are going to be covered in the pages of the paper they own.

BLOCK: You know, it's interesting because similar questions are also being raised about the new ownership of The Boston Globe, which is being bought by John Henry - he's the principal owner of the Boston Red Sox. And some have mentioned a very critical investigative piece that The Globe ran a couple of years ago, critical of players and managers.

John Henry said at the time it's reprehensible that it was written about in the first place, which makes you wonder whether it's reasonable to think that that piece wouldn't have been in the paper if John Henry were The Globe's owner at that time.

BROWN: Well, he was wearing a different hat at the time, and we don't know whether he would have that same point of view as the media owner. And he's entitled to that opinion and that uninformed worldview as the owner of the team. And he said it in an emotional moment, no doubt.

The interesting thing about that circumstance is The New York Times owned a piece of the Boston Red Sox at the same time they owned The Boston Globe. And The New York Times, of course, allowed The Boston Globe to pursue stories about the Boston Red Sox wherever those stories went, and John Henry knows that. And that's exactly the right model, and we have no evidence that he won't stick with that model.

BLOCK: Would you assume that as time goes on we're going to be seeing more and more deals like this being made and more and more potential conflicts of interests like we're talking about?

BROWN: Yes, absolutely. To the extent that these properties are more and more emerging as opportunities for people of means to be involved in journalism with varying agendas, we're going to have to be very careful about keeping an eye on conflicts of interest, and we're going to have to be very clear, and maybe even come up with new disclosure means to make sure those conflicts are quite clear.

BLOCK: Merrill Brown, it's good to talk to you. Thanks so much.

BROWN: My pleasure. Thank you.

BLOCK: Merrill Brown directs the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University in New Jersey.

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