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**Title:** Getting past 'The Wall'

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**GETTING PAST `THE WALL'****In a society where business and ethics often clash, good journalism can be good business.**

I was surprised, like most journalists and journalism scholars, when the deal that the Los Angeles Times made with the Staples Center sports arena came to light. It was surprising that the news organization would become a "founding partner" of the arena, paying \$3 million per year for the privilege. It was surprising that the publisher was not sensitive to the problem of splitting revenues with Staples, the story subject, or with Staples, the advertiser. But it was even more surprising that editorial and business side would deceive readers by producing an ad supplement that looked like the regular Sunday Magazine.

But what I find truly amazing is that some journalists and scholars think that we should all work hard to rebuild "The Wall." It was the myth of a wall between business and editorial that caused the problem in the first place. The Wall was a lousy metaphor for the 20th century style of doing journalism and is completely unworkable for the corporate creation of news that journalists are doing today.

Using The Wall as a metaphor for the separation between financial and professional interests creates an unrealistic division and encourages unhealthy denial. The metaphor of The Wall says to reporters and news managers, "Don't think about the financial aspects of this company--just go ahead and do the news." The Wall says to marketing, advertising and circulation, "Don't think about the professional aspects of this company--just go ahead and make money."

The problem with that kind of thinking is that the newsroom and business side are dependent on one another. The decline over the past two decades in resources for investigative and in-depth reporting is a direct result of owners wanting more profit and less cost for putting out a product. The lack of coverage of the parent company is directly connected to what is happening on the business side of The Wall. Many critics of civic journalism suggest that marketing--not good reporting--is the prime motivation for this latter 20th century movement to connect news organizations more closely with the communities they cover. As we have seen with the L.A. Times and Staples, along

with countless less-publicized indiscretions, if the business side doesn't keep in mind what kind of product they are promoting, it is far too easy to slip into deals that prostitute the editorial product.

The solution is not to build a bigger wall, but to understand what causes conflicts of interest. It may be difficult to think beyond The Wall now because American journalism has been particularly arbitrary and self-serving in deciding what counts as a conflict of interest.

Remember when it was a conflict of interest for news organizations to be too closely involved with some community initiatives? At the same time that they were being chastised for contributing money for or against gambling initiatives, reporters were urged to support the United Way campaign and pledge cards were distributed in the newsroom. No one seemed to notice how difficult that might make it for reporters to cover the big business of United Way or for them to cover the myriad of problems in the town's United Way-sponsored agencies.

Remember when it was a conflict of interest for a reporter to take her talents or skills to another news organization? That was in the days before mega-mergers meant that one parent company owned a plethora of news outlets. That was before CNN and Time shared a news show. This conventional idea of what counted as conflict of interest cracked when reporters became the "experts" on Sunday morning analysis shows.

A conflict of interest occurs only when an organization, or its agent, is likely to violate a specific professional responsibility by choosing to fulfill a financial or personal interest instead. Economics and ethics are not contradictory. The need to make money does not have to get in the way of meeting professional responsibilities.

Journalism is different from every other social institution in that the job of journalism is to tell people what they need to know for self-governance. Journalism does far more than that, but this is the special, narrow little niche that defines how journalism is different from advertising, public relations, the entertainment industry, speech on the Web and other kinds of mass communication in society. The citizen's need for self governance includes information as rudimentary as a bridge under construction and as sophisticated as the complex understandings necessary to advance democracy. The job of journalism in any community at any time is to tell people what they need to know to manage themselves.

News organizations are those businesses that have taken on the job of fulfilling the special function of journalism. They have an ethical responsibility to do what they have implicitly and explicitly promised audiences that they will do--give all the news fit to print, tell people what they need to get through their busy day, provide all of the news all of the time. News organizations have an obligation to provide people information that is necessary for self-governance for the simple reason that they have told people that that is what they are going to do. Those who work for the news organizations--reporters and editors and even publishers - have an obligation to carry out that promise. News organizations need to do their jobs in a way that turns a reasonable profit.

Rather than a wall between business and editorial, I propose that economics and ethics be thought of as a pair of interlocking circles. It is possible to act ethically--for journalists to do their job --in a way that does not meet the economic interests of the company. It is possible to act economically--to make money--in a way that does not fulfill the news organization's social responsibility. But the best decisions for the practice of for-profit journalism are those that are made in the intersection of economics and ethics. The best decisions neither detract from the long-term financial health of the organization nor cause unjustified harm to story subjects, sources or readers. A metaphor like this allows everyone involved--publishers, editors, advertisers, reporters and even readers--to engage in conversation of how the news organization can best do its job and turn a profit.

The economics vs. ethics difficulties that we are seeing in American journalism are not unlike those that we are seeing in American medicine. There are well-publicized examples of how for-profit managed care companies have failed to provide adequate health care. In most cases, caregivers and their patients feel helpless, victimized by the

push for big profits. That's not unlike the helplessness I hear expressed in newsrooms about profit driving the editorial product. But for-profit managed care and for-profit journalism still have their social responsibilities to fulfill.

American journalism needs a long and loud public conversation about the job of news organizations and the pressures that get in the way of them doing their jobs. We need good reporting on the business of journalism that exposes the every day business decisions that weaken editorial products. We need reporting on profit margins and decreased resources. Although reporting like this is likely to make owners uncomfortable, it illustrates a convergence of interests rather than a conflict of interests. We also need reporting on decisions that show that economics and ethics can work together.

It seems odd that we place information--the lifeblood of society--in the hands of for-profit companies just as it seems odd to me that we place healthcare in the hands of for-profit companies. But, as that is the case, the job of those of us who think seriously about such issues is to facilitate the work necessary to ensure that good journalism is good business.

#### ILLUSTRATION (BLACK & WHITE)

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