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# Building barriers

## *The case against financial involvement*

**News organizations should not use their checkbooks to show their community involvement. Limit boosterism to the editorial pages.**

*By Deni Elliott*

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*Author bio information is from the time of article submission and may not be current.*

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Some news organizations own pieces of downtown hotels, some help restore historical sites. Others revitalize areas near the newspaper offices or finance convention centers. It’s all part of being good corporate citizens, some publishers say.

This notion of corporate responsibility may please civic boosters, but when news organizations start handing over money to create the kind of community they want to see, they also create conflicts of interest and barriers which interfere with their reporters’ ability to do their jobs.

No matter how carefully guidelines are engineered to protect the reporting staff from influence, they can’t change the inherent conflict. Any guidelines to protect the reporter who’s covering the company just underscore the fact that this story is treated differently.

Publishers who argue for financial involvement say it’s not a problem.

holder in the underground Atlanta revitalization.

You take on the projects, Smith says, but be open about it with your readers.

Publisher Raymond Jansen said that the Hartford Courant's involvement in the restoration of Busnell Park, the city's centerpiece, should "not be any cause for concern on the part of someone covering the event."

Courant reporters should cover it like any other company in town.

But they can't.

Reporters can't report on their bosses' financial dealings without a vested interest any more than they could report dispassionately on their spouse's financial dealings. There's a conflict there that's enhanced in companies where reporters hold shares of the stock. Now they, themselves, are the owners on whom they are reporting. Being open with the public about the company's financial involvements doesn't change the fact that they ought not be there in the first place. And now that your audience knows that your business coverage isn't objective, what should it do? Read the alternative weeklies? Turn to competitors' coverage? These are luxuries that many communities don't have.

Stories about in-house financial concerns often get special handling which only compounds the problem.

Take accuracy, for example. Everyone thinks that every story should be accurate, but publishers get especially nervous about company stories.

"If you can't get it right about yourself, how can you get it correct about someone else," asks Minneapolis Star-Tribune publisher Roger Parkinson.

So, at the Star-Tribune, stories about the company are read by top management, a process endorsed by business editor Larry Werner.

"The public does notice when we say we got stories wrong about the Star-Trib," he said. "Our product is credibility."

But those additional layers of editing bring "accompanying layers of frustration," said Star-Tribune writer Dan Wascoe. And they put the reporter on notice that this story will be handled differently from the rest. What one person calls a slight change to enhance readers' understanding, another may call bias.

The gloves go on with company stories long before they are edited. With other stories, reporters are expected to go with what they can find, however and whenever they can find it. But with stories dealing with company financial involvement, reporters are put in the strange situation of having too much access: Information heard in-house is often off-limits.

might not. If we get information because we're employees, we try not to treat that information as the basis for pursuing a story."

Reporters have got to refrain from going with their special information if management is going to be open with the staff, said Parkinson. "Otherwise, you force me back into a shell," he said.

At the Providence-Journal, a shop which lacks such strict policies, writer John Castellucci says he still worries about how this reporting stacks up against his other newspaper work.

"I'm not sure if I'm being tougher than I would normally be or more lenient," he said. "When it's in the family, you're not sure what's going on subconsciously."

You can't get around the problems of reporting on yourself. Period. Publishers who believe they can are deluding themselves. The inherent conflict of interest is unfair to the reporters who must cover stories in which their companies are involved — and to the community which gets the sanitized, company-approved version of events.

For news organizations, being a good corporate citizen means you report on change. You don't create it.

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