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The David Bradley Effect

The corrupting effect of his off-the-record salons.

By Jack Shafer

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The off-the-record-for-dollars salon scheme that got Katharine Weymouth and the *Washington Post* in so much trouble last week prompted [TPM Muckraker](#) to flush David Bradley—owner and publisher of the *Atlantic*—into the open about his salon-happy organization.

In an [interoffice memo](#) that he posted to the Web yesterday, Bradley defended the corporately sponsored, off-the-record public-policy dinners that his company has been hosting for "a half-dozen years" in his patented [self-effacing](#) manner. He claims that his presence at his sponsored dinners "as to all things—tends to dampen high spirits." Elsewhere in the memo, Bradley writes, "Please forgive me if this runs long." Oh, no, David! It's your blogspace and your defense! Go on as long as you'd like! I'll even hold your coat while you do!

Bradley separates the intimate, off-the-record dinners he throws for policymakers and journalists in which no money changes hands, [written](#) about in April by the *Washington Post's* Howard Kurtz, and the buck-raking, targeted ones that he convenes for corporate sponsors such as AstraZeneca, Microsoft, GE, Allstate, and Citi. As TPM Muckraker reported, the topics presented at Bradley's paid sessions have been financially relevant to the sponsors (in order, health care, global trade, energy, the American city, global markets).

There's not much new or wildly controversial about Bradley's noncommercial sessions. In its various incarnations over the decades, the Georgetown journalism establishment has tossed a million off-the-record dinners for the powerful. Former Washington Post Co. Chairman Katharine Graham served so many meals to notables at her Georgetown mansion that the District of Columbia's Food Safety Division could have easily insisted on conducting regular health inspections of her kitchen. You might not like the fact that the journalists and politicians socialize, but you can't do much about it.

It's Bradley's corporate salons and his defense of them that deserve scrutiny. He claims that the sessions are placed off the record to avoid canned remarks. "My own view is that there is a great deal of constructive conversation that can take place only with the promise that no headline is being written," he writes.

Has Bradley never attended a function at the [Cato Institute](#), where the repeal of the drug laws, the phasing out of Social Security, the privatization of education, the dismantling of the Cold War war machine, and other contentious topics are discussed openly and cordially on a regular basis? The same can be said for discussions at the [Brookings Institution](#), the [American Enterprise Institute](#), the [Center for American Progress](#), and other think tank venues. Elsewhere in his memo, Bradley applauds his company's ability to attract "authors and activists" representing "all sides of an issue" at its talks: "conservatives and liberals,



conservative think tanks and liberal think tanks, corporations and consumer groups, all manner of associations and all manner of environmental, health advocacy and public interest groups. The art here is bringing disparate parties to table for a constructive conversation."

It's fantasy to imagine that there's any "art" to staging constructive conversation in Washington, and Bradley knows it. All that's required is the selection of a topic in the news, the recruitment of a few interesting speakers, the procurement of a small auditorium or hall, the distribution of a few hundred invitations, and the production of an attractive cheese-ball-and-white-wine spread. Hit those marks, and the city's journalists, bureaucrats, office-holders, scholars, lobbyists, activists, policymakers, and freeloaders will storm your event to genially wonk around the clock. It would be easier to get a nap at your average think tank debate than in a soundproof room.

So why Bradley's elaborate defense of the off-the-record rules? Going off the record is what Washingtonians do to make themselves feel important. By placing his paid salons off the record and charging high prices, Bradley makes them appear exclusive, valuable, and daring. The sponsors feel important because they think they're impressing their audience with their frankness and because they're encouraged into thinking that the off-the-record journalists and politicians are sharing electric insights they could never share with their readers. The politicians, well, the politicians live in their own cognitive dissonance bubble. Any audience will do.

The rest of the country knows how badly off-the-record stinks. In 2004, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz's handler [invited](#) several regional reporters to meet his boss after he gave a speech in Omaha, Neb. Wolfowitz's comments would have to be attributed to a "senior Defense Department official," the handler said. The reporters replied that they and their editors had no interest in a no-name briefing. Besides, they noted, it was already public knowledge that Wolfowitz was the most senior Defense Department official in the region that day. Why the ridiculous sourcing arrangement? The standoff ended and the interview commenced when Wolfowitz agreed to go on the record.

If paid off-the-record salons are charades, why oppose them? For one thing, I hate to see anybody defrauded, even AstraZeneca. For another, no journalist should serve as an accomplice to fraud. But most important, the off-the-record comfort zones run by Bradley for the benefit of his corporate clients corrupts the business of journalism in deep, fundamental ways. Every new off-the-record venue drives a measurable quantity of political discourse out of the public sphere and into the private. It's in the interests of journalists and the public, as the Omaha press corps demonstrated, to push the powerful onto the record. Establishing safe harbors for them—and charging them for the privilege of anchorage—is not what journalism is about. The erection of such salons says this to corporations and public officials: You owe your candor not to the public but to one another, and journalistic organizations such as the *Atlantic* and the *Washington Post* will gladly pocket the cash to help you keep your "secrets."

If David Bradley doesn't understand this, will somebody please underwrite a public debate to fill him in?

More silly self-effacement from David Bradley's memo: "[T]his is a modest brag, I think I'm well suited to convening intelligent, committed people across wide divides." Where does he get this crap, Toastmasters International? Send Toastmaster tips via e-mail to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. I polish my speaking skill several times a day through my [Twitter](#) feed. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate's* readers' forum; in a future article; or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.)

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