

REPORT FROM THE OMBUDSMAN

Does an e-commerce venture teaming the parent company of *Brill's Content* with NBC, CBS, and other media outlets taint the magazine's editorial integrity? BY BILL KOVACH

OF COMING AND GOING. Two reader complaints typify the comments I received after the announcement of the creation of Contentville.com, which, after its formal launch this summer, will team Brill Media Ventures, L.P., the parent organization of this magazine, with CBS and NBC and others in an Internet business venture selling all varieties of content, including magazines, e-books, traditional books, transcripts, academic dissertations, speeches, and archives of articles from thousands of magazines. Both readers wondered about conflict of interest now that this magazine has an economic interest in the operation of companies the magazine was created to monitor on the consumer's behalf. From what I have read and heard from colleagues and in conversations with readers of *Brill's Content*, these complaints represent a general disquiet about the impact of the new business arrangement on the magazine's journalistic independence.

An e-mail from Tom Mentzer, who describes himself as a graduate student in journalism, says, "How Steven Brill can add his name to such a project, a synergistic nightmare that he would have rabidly attacked given different circumstances, is beyond me."

The other message, also e-mailed, came from Ken Horowitz, who attached other critical online articles about the question of conflicts of interest, which, he said, "echo my extreme concerns about the ability of *Brill's Content* to remain 'untarnished.'" Horowitz added, "My confidence in *Brill's Content* is dropping as each issue appears on my doorstep...."

Since my two-year contract with *Brill's Content*, which stipulated that I could be neither fired nor rehired, ends with this column, it looks as if I'm ending where I began, writing about the potential for conflicts of interest in a publication that has set itself up to monitor the behavior of others in the media.

In September 1998, in the second issue of the magazine, Steven Brill and I debated the potential for a conflict of interest in his combined roles as owner, editor, and writer. That exchange concerned a joint business venture with NBC-TV he had been considering.

I wrote:

"The conflict Brill most insistently rejects—conflict between the roles and responsibilities of the publisher and editor—remains the most troublesome. As publisher, Brill has a fundamental commitment

to the publication's economic success and to its investors. The publisher must therefore calculate all financial aspects of the business, aspects that could raise a conflict with the editor's direct responsibility to the consumer of the information. For example, when publisher Brill entered into negotiations with NBC-TV about a joint business arrangement, editor Brill had no choice but to attend a meeting.

"It was a meeting to which the editor should have objected. Only after the potential deal became public, and reporters called Brill to ask about its impact on the credibility of his new magazine, did publisher Brill hear what editor Brill should have told him."

Although *Brill's Content* has a new editor in chief, Brill, who is now CEO and chairman, retains a strong hand in editing copy and deciding what does and does not appear in the magazine. I do not believe that there is an impregnable wall, Chinese or otherwise, that can be erected between those who preside over the business interests of a journalistic organization and those who are responsible for the content it produces. But I do

believe that the potential for a conflict is more likely to be realized—but unrecognized—when both interests are merged in a single person.

For nearly three years now, I have been working with a group called the Committee of Concerned Journalists. Our chief concern has been expressed in a statement that says in part:

"This is a critical moment for journalism in America. While the craft in many respects has

never been better—consider the supply of information or the skill of reporters—there is a paradox to our communications age. Revolutionary changes in technology, in our economic structure, and in our relationship with the public are pulling journalism from its traditional moorings. As audiences fragment and our companies diversify, there is a growing debate within news organizations about our responsibilities as businesses and our responsibilities as journalists. Many journalists feel a sense of lost purpose. There is even doubt about the meaning of news, doubt evident when serious journalistic organizations drift toward opinion, infotainment and sensation out of balance with news.

"Journalists share responsibility for the uncertainty. Our values and professional standards are often vaguely expressed and inconsistently honored. We have been slow to change habits in the presentation of news that may have lost their relevance. Change is necessary.

"Yet as we change, we assert some core principles of journalism are enduring. They are those that make journalism a public service central to self government. They define our profession not as the act of communicating but as a set of [CONTINUED ON PAGE 132]

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SPECIAL NOTE

Two years ago, when we began this magazine, we also began something never before tried by any publication: We appointed Bill Kovach our outside, independent ombudsman. His mandate was to write whatever he wanted at whatever length he wanted concerning any

complaint he received about the content of our magazine. We stipulated that his term would last two years. I hope it isn't inappropriate to thank him for all of his work and for making this initiative succeed.

Beginning with the next issue, Michael Gartner will be our outside ombudsman. In terms of experience and reputation, Gartner is a worthy

successor to Kovach. He has been Page One editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, editor and president of *The Des Moines Register*, and president of NBC News. In 1997 he won a Pulitzer Prize for editorials he wrote at the *Tribune of Ames, Iowa*, which he then edited and co-owned. He now is a majority owner of the Iowa Cubs minor-league baseball team. STEVEN BRILL