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The CIA, Amazon, Bezos and the Washington Post : An Exchange with Executive Editor Martin Baron



By Norman Solomon

To: Martin Baron, Executive Editor, and Kevin Merida, Managing Editor, The Washington Post

Dear Mr. Baron and Mr. Merida:

On behalf of more than 25,000 signers of a petition to The Washington Post, I'm writing this letter to request a brief meeting to present the petition at a time that would be convenient for you on Jan. 14 or 15.

Here is the text of the petition, launched by RootsAction.org:

"A basic principle of journalism is to acknowledge when the owner of a media outlet has a major financial relationship with the subject of coverage. We strongly urge the Washington Post to be fully candid with its readers about the fact that the newspaper's new owner, Jeff Bezos, is the founder and CEO of Amazon which recently landed a \$600 million contract with the CIA. The Washington Post's coverage of the CIA should include full disclosure that the sole owner of the Post is also the main owner of Amazon — and Amazon is now gaining huge profits directly from the CIA."

The petition includes cogent comments by many of the people who signed it.

I hope that you can set aside perhaps 10 minutes on Jan. 14 or 15 for the purpose of receiving the petition and hearing a summary of its signers' concerns.

For confirmation of an appointment, I can be reached on my cell phone...

Thank you.

Sincerely,
Norman Solomon
Director and Cofounder, RootsAction.org

[January 2, 2014]

Dear Mr. Solomon:

Thank you for your note. I was able to read the petition on the RootsAction.org site and to see the list of those who signed it. I certainly would be happy to review any additional information you might send.

The Post has among the strictest ethics policies in the field of journalism, and we vigorously enforce it. We have routinely disclosed corporate conflicts when they were directly relevant to our coverage. We reported on Amazon's pursuit of CIA contracts in our coverage of plans by Jeff Bezos to purchase The Washington Post.

We also have been very aggressive in our coverage of the intelligence community, including the CIA, NSA, and other agencies, as you

should know. *The Post* was at the leading edge of disclosures about the NSA in 2013. Most recently, it reported on the CIA's hidden involvement in Colombia's fight against FARC rebels, including a fatal missile attack across the border in Ecuador. You can be sure neither the NSA nor the CIA has been pleased with publication of their secrets.

Neither Amazon nor Jeff Bezos was involved, nor ever will be involved, in our coverage of the intelligence community.

The petition's request for disclosure of Amazon's CIA contract in every story we write about the CIA is well outside the norm of conflict-of-interest disclosures at media companies. *The Post* is a personal investment by Jeff Bezos, whose stake in Amazon is large but well less than a majority. The CIA's multi-year contract with Amazon is a small fraction of company revenues that have been estimated at roughly \$75 billion in 2013. Amazon maintains no corporate connection to *The Post*.

Even so, we have been careful to disclose Jeff Bezos' connection to *The Post* and Amazon when directly relevant to our coverage, and we will continue to do so. For example, such disclosures would be called for in coverage circumstances such as the following: CIA contracting practices, the CIA's use of cloud services, big-data initiatives at the CIA, Amazon's pursuit of cloud services as a line of business, and Amazon corporate matters in general.

We take ethics very seriously here at *The Post*. One of our policies is that we seek comment from the subjects of our stories prior to publishing them and that we make a genuine effort to hear and absorb their point of view. By contrast, I am unaware of any effort to hear us out prior to the launch of this petition drive. A personal meeting now does not seem necessary or useful.

I hope this note explains our perspective. And again, if you wish to send additional information that you feel might be helpful to us, we will review it closely.

Sincerely,
Martin Baron
Executive Editor
The Washington Post

[January 2, 2014]

Dear Mr. Baron:

Thank you for your letter.

Whatever the *Post*'s guidelines and record on ethical standards, few journalists could have anticipated ownership of the paper by a multibillionaire whose outside company would be so closely tied to the CIA. Updating of the standards is now appropriate.

You write that *The Washington Post* has "routinely disclosed corporate conflicts when they were directly relevant to our coverage." But the *RootsAction.org* petition is urging the *Post* to provide readers of its CIA coverage with full disclosure that would adequately address — and meaningfully inform readers about — relevant circumstances of the current ownership.

Those circumstances are not adequately met by a narrow definition of "corporate conflicts." A reality is that the *Post* is now solely owned by someone who is by far the **largest stakeholder** in a world-spanning corporate giant that has close business ties — and is seeking more extensive deals than its current \$600 million contract — with the CIA, an agency which the newspaper reports on regularly.

The petition requests that *The Washington Post* adopt a full disclosure policy that is commensurate with this situation. The gist of the request is recognition that, as the saying goes, sunshine is the best disinfectant for any potential conflict of interest.

When you write that the *Post* has a policy of routinely disclosing corporate conflicts when "directly relevant to our coverage," a key question comes to the fore: What is "directly relevant"? Given that few agencies are more secretive than the CIA — and even the most enterprising reporters are challenged to pry loose even a small fraction of its secrets — how do we know which CIA stories are "directly relevant" to the fact that Amazon is providing cloud computing services to the CIA?

Amazon's contract with the CIA is based on an assessment that Amazon Web Services can provide the agency with digital-data computing security that is second to none. We can assume that a vast amount of information about CIA activities is to be safeguarded by Amazon. With what assurance can we say which stories on CIA activities are not "directly relevant" to Jeff Bezos's dual role as sole owner of the *Post* and largest stakeholder in Amazon?

We actually don't know what sort of data is involved in what your letter calls "the CIA's use of cloud services." The disclosure/non-disclosure policy that you've outlined seems to presume that, for instance, there would be no direct relevance of the cloud services contract to coverage of such matters as CIA involvement in rendition of prisoners to regimes for torture; or in targeting for drone strikes; or

in data aggregation for counterinsurgency. Are you assuming that the Post's coverage of such topics is not "directly relevant" to the Bezos/Amazon ties with the CIA and therefore should not include disclosure of the financial ties that bind the Post's owner to the CIA?

Readers of a Post story on the CIA — whether about drones or a still-secret torture report, to name just two topics — should be informed of the Post/Bezos/Amazon/CIA financial ties. In the absence of such in-story disclosure, there is every reason to believe that many readers will be unaware that the Post's owner is someone with a major financial stake in an Amazon-CIA deal worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

If Amazon's \$600 million multiyear cloud contract with the CIA is a small fraction of the company's revenue, there is clear intent for it to grow larger. And \$600 million is, by itself, hardly insignificant; let's remember that Mr. Bezos bought the Post for less than half that amount.

"We look forward to a successful relationship with the CIA," a statement from Amazon said two months ago. In public statements, Mr. Bezos and Amazon have made clear that they view this as a growing part of Amazon's business: a feather in the corporate cap of the company in its drive to increase market share of such business operations. This is intended as a major and expansive income source for Amazon and for its CEO, Mr. Bezos, whose personal wealth of \$25 billion is a consequence of Amazon's financial gains.

Why not provide a sentence in the Post's substantive coverage of CIA activities, to the effect that "The Post's owner Jeff Bezos is the largest stakeholder in Amazon, which has a \$600 million contract with the CIA"?

By declining to provide such disclosure, the Post is failing the transparency test when coverage of the CIA falls outside of the circumscribed areas where your letter says Post policy now provides for disclosure ("CIA contracting practices, the CIA's use of cloud services, big-data initiatives at the CIA, Amazon's pursuit of cloud services as a line of business, and Amazon corporate matters in general").

*Such concerns are among the reasons why tens of thousands of people, including many Post readers, have signed the petition to The Washington Post that I will be delivering on January 15. While it's unfortunate that you don't want to have a meeting for a few minutes on that day, I hope that you will mull over the concerns that are propelling this **petition** forward.*

*Sincerely,
Norman Solomon
RootsAction.org*

[January 4, 2014]

Dear Mr. Solomon:

Thank you for expanding upon your views.

Just to reiterate, The Post has among the strictest ethics policies in the field of journalism. Those policies are sufficiently expansive, comprehensive, and current to take into account The Post's acquisition by Jeff Bezos. The policies are strictly enforced. However, as I explained in detail in my previous note, your proposal is far outside the norm of disclosures about potential conflicts of interest at media organizations.

Meantime, as plain evidence of our independence, we will continue our aggressive coverage of the intelligence community, including the CIA. I hope you've noticed it. The CIA has, and it's not happy.

*Sincerely,
Martin Baron
Executive Editor
The Washington Post*

[January 4, 2014]
