

# SINCLAIR

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### **SINCLAIR RESPONDS TO MULTIPLE ORGANIZATIONS' MISLEADING AND IRRESPONSIBLE NEWS COVERAGE**

BALTIMORE (January 11, 2017) – Sinclair Broadcast Group, Inc. (Nasdaq: SBGI) today commented on multiple news organizations that have recently published or perpetuated misleading and irresponsible reports regarding Sinclair's political coverage of the Trump and Clinton campaigns. The recent reporting by the Washington Post was too egregious for the Company to stand by quietly and not inform the public of the incomplete and misleading coverage published by a once respected newspaper.

Below is an Op Ed from the Company submitted to the Washington Post, that the Post refused to publish. Immediately below is a reply letter to the Editorial Page Editor of the Washington Post, Fred Hiatt, requesting that they reconsider in order to set the record straight with their readers. The Post offered Sinclair a 200 word letter to the editor which Sinclair did not consider to be a reasonable response.

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Letter to Fred Hiatt and Fred Reynolds of the Washington Post submitted by Sinclair's VP of News, Scott Livingston on Wednesday, January 4, 2017.

"I'm disappointed to learn that you are not publishing John Solomon's op-ed article. I believe you need to reconsider this decision since what you published didn't reflect the truth about our political coverage of the Trump and Clinton presidential campaigns. Refusing to publish this is a major disservice to your readers. This is another example of your bias and reckless regard for the truth.

Your piece on Sinclair's political coverage was misleading and irresponsible. Many key facts were omitted, facts that your newspaper was aware of and refused to include in the article. Your story was largely based on details published in a Politico article from the previous week. Sinclair went above and beyond with interview offers to both campaigns. This was a fully-transparent project called "Beyond the Podium" where candidates could speak directly and at length to viewers on key topics. The simple fact is that one candidate took advantage of this offer and the other did not. We did make a point to have a democratic party spokesperson or Clinton surrogate on each week. Yet those details were ignored in favor of a more salacious story smacking of intrigue and conspiracy.

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Readers of your newspaper deserved that additional context when assessing Sinclair's actions and motivations with our "Beyond the Podium" initiative.

The Post story contained misinformation, which could easily have been vetted by your editor, prior to publication. You owed it to your readers not to publish a story that purposely omitted many of the key facts we shared with your reporter. The least you can do is publish this Op-Ed.

After some simple journalistic due diligence, the chair of the Society of Professional Journalists Ethics Committee, Andrew Seaman, concluded that our coverage was fair and met the journalistic standards that were ignored by numerous news organizations including Politico and The Washington Post. Here is an apology he wrote after posting an article based on the misinformation.

'After hearing from Sinclair's representatives and viewing emails between the company and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's campaign, I don't believe the interview arrangements fell outside what would be considered ethical journalism. Therefore, I apologize to Sinclair for assuming the Politico story, which was based off third-party reports, was accurate. From what I can tell, the situation is a victim of a game of telephone. One person makes a statement, another person repeats that statement with some errors and it builds upon itself. Unfortunately, I made myself part of the chain by not reaching out to Sinclair for clarification. I'm sorry.'

Moving forward, our news organization is committed to tracking the truth and holding accountable other media organizations that publish misleading, biased and fake news stories. We have a responsibility to our viewers to identify organizations and members of the media that disregard the truth."

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Op Ed: By John Solomon submitted to the Washington Post on December 30, 2016.

### **Washington Post, Politico and the perils of centimeter-deep journalism**

A month into my experience as a *Washington Post* reporter, I was sitting alone in the newspaper's cafeteria when a stoic voice chimed in. "Mind if I join you?" I peered up to see Ben Bradlee, the news giant most journalists of my post-Watergate generation grew up pining to work for.

Kind yet salty, Ben sat down and quickly inspired a conversation about the future of journalism. The year was 2007, and the news industry was enduring vast disruption from the advance of the internet. Ben quickly painted a picture of a bleak future he wanted to avoid, one where he-said-she-said journalism became an accepted substitute for undisputed facts. And an era where reporters might lack the resources or attention span to decipher truth from fiction.

"Truth can't be proven in just 15-second sound bites or 100-word web files. Precision can't be achieved if a reporter has just *some* of the accurate facts. And reporting, if it is to remain in the public interest, can't succeed if it is just a centimeter deep," the wise old mentor proclaimed.

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Nearly a decade later, Ben's words, scrawled inside my reporter's notebook that day, seem all the more prescient after two spawns of the Bradlee era of journalism – the modern-day *Washington Post* and *Politico* – reported stories recently about the company I now work for, Sinclair Broadcast Group.

*Politico* was the first to report, from anonymous sources, that Donald Trump's son-in-law and campaign strategist Jared Kushner purportedly told a private audience the campaign had struck a "deal" with Sinclair, the largest owner of TV stations in America, to provide "straighter" news coverage in return for regular interview access with the candidate.

*Politico* reporters Hadas Gold and Josh Dawsey were unable to reach Kushner to get a further explanation. Instead, they interviewed Sinclair's news chief, Scott Livingston, who disputed with bundles of written proof that there was any "deal." In fact, Livingston explained, the interviews with Trump were part of a larger initiative called *Beyond the Podium* in which both Trump and Hillary Clinton were offered regular interviews with Sinclair reporters to discuss their stance on issues. Trump accepted; Clinton did not.

*Politico* was offered a chance to look at the emails between Sinclair's journalists and both campaigns, but demurred. It also declined a chance to review the interview videos Sinclair journalists conducted to see if they provided "softball" treatment.

What *Politico* wrote was the classic he-said-she-said story that Bradlee fretted about. There was no refereeing of the truth, no deeper dive into the facts, no way for a reader to determine truth from fiction. It simply led with the anonymous descriptions of Kushner's comments, followed by Sinclair's denial a few paragraphs later and added a cryptic insinuation that some thought money changed hands.

*The Washington Post's* Paul Farhi took the story a step further. Like an exercise of Boy Scouts passing a message down a line, only to have it misconstrued, he embellished the *Politico* story with an even sexier headline. Farhi proclaimed Sinclair had "helped" Donald Trump's campaign. Instead of "straighter" coverage like Kushner was originally quoted as saying, the newspaper declared Sinclair had provided "favorable" coverage. With a catchy turn of a phrase, Farhi even injected his own opinion that Livingston's denial appeared to "be at odds" with Kushner's comments.

Once again, journalism was reduced to he-said-she-said storytelling. And to further its case, the *Post* quoted from some leaked newsroom documents suggesting Sinclair somehow tried to further help Trump by mandating all stations air the interviews and providing some of the questions for anchors or reporters to ask.

I was a firsthand witness to what happened between Sinclair and the campaigns. As head of Sinclair's new millennial news site Circa.com, I joined Livingston in pursuing the candidate interviews. The *Beyond the Podium* initiative was paired with the *Circa Challenge* so that some of the interviews would be conducted by Circa journalists asking questions about millennial issues, a la MTV years ago.

None of that information, including the contemporaneous emails, were ever included by *Politico* or the *Post*. None of the raw video interviews were ever reviewed by the reporters to see how Sinclair reporters conducted themselves. And most of the daily "mandatory carry" emails sent from Sinclair to

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stations were never reviewed, save for the few selected leaks. Instead, insinuation was substituted for in-depth factual reporting.

Had these reporters gone deeper, here is what they would have found:

- The first substantive discussions for candidate interviews with Sinclair occurred with the Clinton campaign on July 1, about five weeks before the Trump campaign finally engaged on the idea on Aug. 8. And Sinclair had scored an earlier interview with Secretary Clinton in the spring.
- Sinclair executives – more than 20 times – pleaded with Clinton’s team to engage on the interviews before and after Trump took us up on the offer.
- Sinclair and Circa employees asked tough questions of Trump, like would his child care tax credit include gay parents (something his evangelical base would oppose) and why he accepted the endorsement of Dick Cheney after years of opposing Cheney’s war in Iraq.
- Sinclair and Circa produced Trump interview packages where Mrs. Clinton’s side of the story was included for balance, even though she passed on the interview offers.
- Most of the Sinclair packages explained the *Beyond the Podium* initiative and made clear Clinton had been offered the same opportunity.
- Sinclair mandated that stations also “must carry” its interviews with Clinton running mate Tim Kaine, Clinton’s millennial outreach team and VP Joe Biden, just like it did the Trump interviews. The reason? Sinclair prides itself on adding exclusive national news to its local newscasts.
- Sinclair livestreamed numerous Clinton political events and speeches on its Web sites, just like Trump

Apparently these facts could not penetrate the centimeter-deep reporting bunkers of both news organizations.

The impact inside Sinclair was real. After the two stories ran, I surveyed Circa’s millennial newsroom. Ninety percent of those who attended my meeting initially thought Sinclair “had gone in the tank” for Trump and nearly half believed Sinclair had paid money for the interviews. When asked why, one employee said it was because *Politico* was a respected news organization that should be trusted even when its reporting was being disputed.

To counter such false impressions, we invited our reporters to look at the full slate of written evidence omitted from the two stories. The Society of Professional Journalists, which originally criticized Sinclair based on the *Politico* story, apologized after seeing the omitted facts. Such things have helped quell concerns, though I doubt Sinclair will ever fully dispel the faux distrust planted by these two stories.

I don’t fault *Politico* or the *Post* for treating Kushner’s comments as news. I don’t fault Kushner for saying what he said, since as a businessman he might have seen our initiative as a good opportunity for either candidate. I don’t doubt there are executives inside Sinclair, like every news organization, who wanted Trump or Clinton to win. I only find fault in the failure of the *Post* and *Politico* to report enough of the facts for a consumer to make their own decision. Likewise, both should feel some shame in portraying “straight” coverage of candidates’ positions on issues – something news organizations once strived to achieve – as a dirty equivalent to “favorable” treatment.

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I suspect it was this sort of half-baked reporting that Bradlee foresaw when he warned a decade earlier of the perils of centimeter-deep journalism.

*John Solomon is an award-winning investigative journalist whose three decades of work for The Associated Press, The Washington Post and The Washington Times exposed scandals in both GOP and Democratic administrations. He currently serves as COO of the Sinclair owned Circa.com news site.*

### About Sinclair Broadcast Group, Inc.

Sinclair is one of the largest and most diversified television broadcasting companies in the country. Including pending transactions, Sinclair, operates and/or provides services to 173 television stations in 81 markets, broadcasting 483 channels and having affiliations with all the major networks. Sinclair is the leading local news provider in the country, as well as a producer of live sports content. Sinclair's content is delivered via multiple-platforms, including over-the-air, multi-channel video program distributors, and digital platforms. The Company regularly uses its website as a key source of company information which can be accessed at [www.sbg.net](http://www.sbg.net).