

Parties and the press

JEFFERSON CITY – The Jefferson City press corps has voted to give the Missouri Times until the end of March to clean up the news organization's ethics mess or face the possibility of losing credentials to cover events in Missouri's state capital.

Ten representatives of wire service, print and broadcast news organizations met Monday to discuss the lobbyist-sponsored parties that Times' publisher Scott Faughn had held for lawmakers at the newspaper's office in Jefferson City. While some press corps members appeared ready to vote to take away the Times' allocation of capital office and parking spaces, the group approved a motion giving it the chance to draft a newsroom policy of editorial independence as well as time to demonstrate that the lobbyist-sponsored parties were no longer taking place.

Collin Reischman, the Times' managing editor, told the group Faughn was not a journalist and was unschooled in ethics policies. And Reischman said Faughn was trying to hire a consultant to give advice on the development of a mission statement, an employee handbook and "best practices" that would prevent problems in the future.

"I do take issue with the way Scott does things," Reischman said. "I told him fifty different times that he shouldn't do them again. If it were up to me, there wouldn't be any parties."

While capital city reporters and lawmakers had been aware of the Times' parties for months, the issue became public Jan. 4 when Rudi Keller of the Columbia Daily Tribune reported details of as many as six events, including the fact they "went largely unreported to the state Ethics Commission."

James Klahr, the executive director of the Missouri Ethics

Commission, said Tuesday that "it would be a good idea" for lobbyists who spend money on lawmakers, either individually or in a group settings like the Times' parties, to report it to the commission.

The reporting requirements aside, several reporters present for Monday's meeting said the parties violated journalistic ethical standards by creating an apparent, if not a real, conflict of interest.

"This has raised credibility questions for us," said Phill Brooks, a journalism professor at the University of Missouri and the KMOX radio reporter covering the capital. "We uphold standards of editorial independence and the avoidance of a conflict of interest."

Brooks noted that two years ago, when the press corps first accredited the Missouri Times, he requested a written policy that described its editorial independence since both the Times' founders, Faughn and former House Speaker Rod Jetton, had been involved in politics. Brooks said he never got the policy.

POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

The Times publishes a weekly print product that's distributed free of charge, and makes stories available on an Internet website: <http://themissouritimes.com>. Reischman said the press run is usually 1,000 to 2,000 issues, but sometimes has been as large as 5,000. The publication has two full time reporters, Reischman and Rachael Herndon, whose editorial independence was questioned during Monday's meeting.

Herndon was identified as the president of the Cole County Young Republicans as recently as June of last year. Copies of emails were distributed at Monday's meeting showing that prior to the November general election, Herndon was going door-to-door campaigning in behalf of Bryan Stumpe, the Republican candidate for Cole County circuit judge. In encouraging others

to work for Stumpe, Herndon's email said, "The current judge is one of the last Democrats holding office in Cole County." The incumbent judge, Patricia Joyce, retained her seat.

"Standards that we expect are not being met when a company is soliciting lobbyists for parties and a reporter working for a paper is a party operative," Keller said.

"I'm not denying that that was problem," Reischman responded, "But we are rectifying that now."

In an interview, Reischman said he had been aware of Herndon's prior political work and that he had told her she had to stop it. But he said he apparently hadn't been emphatic enough on that point. "I should have been more clear," he said. Since then, Reischman said, he had had a "come to Jesus meeting" with Herndon, and she remains a reporter.

Neither Faughn nor Herndon responded to a Gateway Journalism Review reporter's requests for comment.

According to the Missouri Times web site, Herndon studied communication and art history at the University of Missouri in Columbia, and previously worked as a campaign staff member. Reischman has a journalism degree from Webster University.

The web site also describes Faughn as the Missouri Times' publisher and president of SEMO TIMES, a weekly newspaper in Poplar Bluff, Mo. It also describes Faughn as a member of the St. Louis Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists. The SPJ's Code of Ethics says journalists should "avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived" and "remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility." The code also says journalists should "refuse gifts" and shun "political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity."

Faughn is the former mayor of Poplar Bluff. In 2007 he was

convicted in Cape Girardeau County of three counts of forgery.

ALLOCATING SPACE

Journalists covering state government are members of the Missouri Capitol News Association. The organization meets infrequently as the need arises, usually to allocate resources for reporters such as office accommodations, parking spaces and a spot at the Senate press table.

The organization's bylaws require that for an entity to be credentialed, it must distribute news to a broad segment of the public, be independent of any lobbying activity and demonstrate its ability to cover the capital for at least six months. In addition to the Missouri School of Journalism, KMOX and the Columbia Tribune, journalists at Monday's meeting represented the Associated Press, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, the Kansas City Star, St. Louis Public Radio, the MissouriNet, KRCG-TV, and the Jefferson City News Tribune.

After agreeing that Monday's meeting was open to coverage by the Gateway Journalism Review, the group discussed plans by the Republican-controlled state Senate to remove reporters from a press table on the floor of the chamber and sequester them in a spot in an upper gallery. It also voted to accredit Eli Yokley, who writes for a blog Politicmo and supplies news to the Joplin Globe, KY3-TV in Springfield and the New York Times.

After airing the controversy about the Missouri Times, the group agreed to reassess the news organization's performance at a meeting that will be scheduled some time around the legislative Spring break, the last week of March.